CHARTING NEW PATHS FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT: ASIA-PACIFIC REGIONAL REPORT ON BEIJING+30 REVIEW

*The shaded areas of the map indicate ESCAP members and associate members.**

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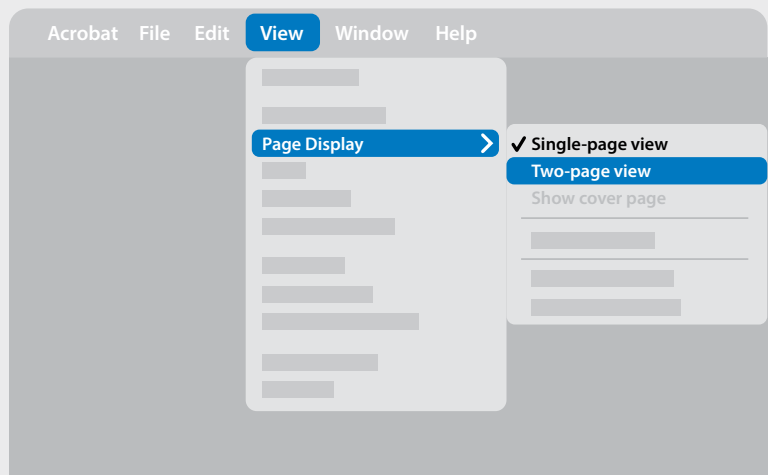
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FOREWORD: ESCAP

Achieving gender equality lies at the heart of United Nations action for sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific. Upholding this human right is fundamental to human dignity; a prerequisite to achieving peace and equality on a healthy planet. The full recognition of the remarkable contribution made by women and girls to powering economic growth and supporting inclusive development is long overdue. Yet gender equality remains an unfulfilled promise in the region, a promise which can no longer wait to be made good.

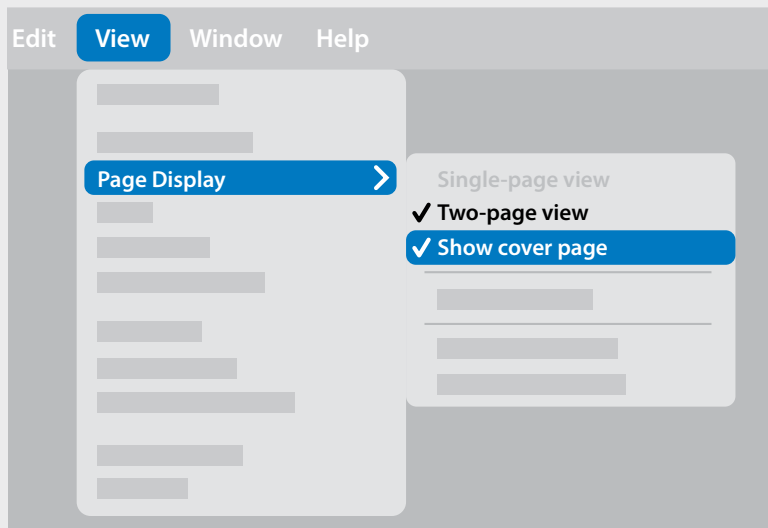In 1995, countries from the world over adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action: a visionary framework for advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Almost 30 years later, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific is honored to lead the regional Beijing+30 review, working closely with member States, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, and the Asia-Pacific Issue-Based Coalition on Promoting Human Rights, Gender Equality and Women Empowerment. This is an opportunity to accelerate progress we cannot miss.

Charting New Paths for Gender Equality and Empowerment: Asia-Pacific Regional Report on Beijing+30 Review was prepared with this opportunity in mind. The report will underpin the regional review exercise and the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on the Beijing+30 Review. A measured assessment of the region's collective progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, it draws on the latest quantitative and qualitative evidence to pinpoint areas of concern and showcase good practice. The objective is to inform the strategies needed to deliver tangible improvements the length and breadth of Asia and the Pacific.

Our assessment demonstrates these improvements are urgently needed. Although education, health, and political representation of women and girls have improved over the past three decades, the COVID-19 pandemic has undermined this progress and exacerbated existing inequalities. Less than half of working-age women in the Asia-Pacific region participate in the labour force and those who do all too often find themselves in low-wage and insecure jobs. Gender-based violence remains alarmingly widespread: one in four women experience physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Global megatrends such as population ageing, increased migration and urbanization could, with climate change, further entrench injustice. It is imperative women and girls play their full part in shaping bold, inclusive responses. We need their leadership to close gender digital divides, eradicate all forms of gender-based violence and tap technological innovation for a just transition towards greener economies.

My hope is that *Charting New Paths for Gender Equality and Empowerment: Asia-Pacific Regional Report on Beijing+30 Review* will contribute to making this leadership possible. The recently adopted Pact for the Future highlights the urgency to remove all legal, social and economic barriers to women's full participation and equal opportunity in political, economic and public life. Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls cannot wait another 30 years. The time to radically accelerate the implementation of the Platform for Action in Asia and the Pacific is now.

Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana
Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)

FOREWORD: UN-WOMEN

As we gather to reflect on 30 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, we stand at a pivotal moment. This Beijing+30 regional review in Asia and the Pacific is not merely a commemoration; it is a call to accelerate our efforts towards achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls across the region.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action laid a robust foundation for women's rights and gender equality, addressing critical areas such as health, education, economic participation, and violence against women. Over the past three decades, we have witnessed remarkable progress in several areas, yet stark challenges remain. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities, and global trends threaten to roll back hard-won gains. As we review our commitments, we must remain vigilant against the setbacks.

The Beijing+30 regional review provides an opportunity to celebrate our achievements while assessing where we stand. This moment allows us to highlight best practices, innovative solutions, and the resilience of women and girls who continue to advocate for their rights. From grassroots movements to national policy changes, we have witnessed how collective action drives transformative change. Women leaders across Asia and the Pacific have emerged as catalysts for change, challenging the status quo and promoting equality.

However, we must also confront the realities that persist. Gender-based violence remains a significant barrier to women's full participation in society. Economic disparities continue to limit opportunities for women – occupational segregation, gender wage gaps, and lack of access to decent work all hinder progress. In many parts of the region, discriminatory laws and cultural norms stifle the voices of women and girls. To truly create an inclusive society, we must recognize and address the intersectionality of gender with other identities, such as race, disability, and sexual orientation.

As we engage in this regional review, it is crucial to center the voices of those most affected by inequality. Women and girls must be at the heart of our discussions and decisions, with their experiences shaping policies that respond to their needs. We must also commit to fostering cross-sector partnerships, holding governments accountable for their commitments and engaging men and boys as allies in the pursuit of gender equality. Importantly, the role of youth cannot be overlooked. Young people are powerful drivers of social change, boldly challenging harmful norms and advancing a more inclusive and gender-equal future.

The regional review, and the report *Charting New Paths for Gender Equality and Empowerment: Asia-Pacific Regional Report on Beijing+30 Review*, also addresses climate change, digital transformation, and other global challenges that have emerged since 1995 and provides us an opportunity to accelerate our efforts and reimagine a new future – one where every woman and girl can thrive without barriers or discrimination. Women and girls facing intersecting forms of inequalities need more support and representation to ensure that the rapid growth and innovation in our region does not leave them behind.

The time for action is now. Together, we can ensure that all voices are heard, all rights are respected, and all people enjoy equal opportunity.

Christine Arab
Regional Director, UN-Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ALMPs	Active Labour Market Policies
APEC	Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BPfA	Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
COP	Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CSW	Commission on the Status of Women
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
ESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
EVAW	Elimination of Violence Against Women
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
GAD	Gender and Development
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GRB	Gender-Responsive Budgeting
GSNI	Gender Social Norms Index
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
ILOSTAT	International Labour Organization Department of Statistics
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
ITU	International Telecommunication Unions
LDC	Least Developed Countries
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex
LLDC	Land-Locked Developing Countries
LNOB	Leave No One Behind
MSMEs	Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises
NAP	National Action Plan
NDCs	Nationally Determined Contributions
NEET	Not in Employment, Education or Training

NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OOP	Out-Of-Pocket
OSH	Occupational Safety and Health
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
RESPECT	World Health Organization Programme on Preventing Violence against Women
RMNCH	Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SRGBV	School-Related Gender-Based Violence
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infection
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UHC	Universal Health Coverage
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDPO	United Nations Department of Peace Operations
UNDRR	United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UN-Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
WHO	World Health Organization
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

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Rohingya women refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, create kites at UN-Women's Multi-Purpose Women's Centres, writing their demands and wishes on them to celebrate International Women's Day in 2018. © UN-Women/Allison Joyce

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gender equality is a fundamental human right, essential to achieve human dignity, peace and equality on a healthy planet. Empowering women and girls spurs productivity and economic growth, it sustains peace and supports inclusive development. Yet, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls remains the unfinished business of our time.

This report has been prepared to inform the Asia-Pacific regional intergovernmental review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in conjunction with the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on the Beijing+30 Review in November 2024. It presents key progress, remaining challenges, good practices and lessons learned by member States and stakeholders involved in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in Asia and the Pacific. Based on a synthesis of latest data and evidence, it proposes strategies to guide the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in Asia and the Pacific in the context of evolving global and regional megatrends, such as the just green transition, digital and technological transformation, and demographic shifts. The intersectional challenges related to gender, age, ethnicity, disability and other socioeconomic factors are reflected in the analysis. The report aims to identify opportunities to address gender inequalities and inform the development of future policies and programmes that can bring about gender-transformative changes for all women and girls of diverse background in Asia and the Pacific.

KEY PROGRESS, GAPS AND CHALLENGES: A SYNTHESIS OF LATEST DATA AND EVIDENCE

In the 30 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Asia-Pacific region has progressed towards achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. However, stark gaps remain, and development is uneven among different subregions, between and within countries, and among population groups of diverse backgrounds. While the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action addresses 12 critical areas of concern, in this report they are clustered into six thematic areas, including poverty reduction and human capital development, shared prosperity and decent work, freedom from gender-based violence, meaningful participation and gender-responsive governance, peaceful and just societies, and gender and the environment. These thematic areas are aligned with the regional and global review practices.

The understanding of the critical areas of concern in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action has evolved since its adoption of in 1995, as has the context in which it is implemented. Poverty is now better analysed and understood from a multidimensional perspective. The understanding of the economy has been expanded to cover issues of empowerment and the environment now encompasses the important role of women and girls in climate action. The concept of peace and security has evolved beyond armed conflict to cover new forms of threats, including cybersecurity

and climate-induced security risks. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic highlighted women's disproportionate unpaid care and domestic responsibilities and the pandemic's socioeconomic consequences continue to pose long-term challenge to countries. New and continuously emerging issues, such as digitalization and the transformative evolution of technology including Artificial Intelligence (AI), and demographic shifts including rapid population ageing, have unprecedented effects on development trajectories that were not foreseen back in 1995. The importance of financing for gender equality has now been recognized as a critical lever for change. This report presents findings in the six thematic areas in perspective of these new and evolving contexts.

Gender gaps continue to hold back poverty reduction and human capital development.

Poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon that goes beyond economic deprivation and covers deprivations related to nutrition, health, education, access to basic resources and services, and standard of living. Pre-existing inequalities defined by gender, age, disability, ethnic, migration status and geographic location subject some population groups to wider and deeper poverty than others. Social protection has been proven a highly effective means to reduce poverty and vulnerability. Investing in human capital through health care, quality education and skills development enables all people to develop their full potential as productive members of society. It is also key to eliminating poverty and sustaining poverty reduction gains.

Several countries in the region have eradicated extreme poverty, and significant strides have been made towards improved social protection; expanded universal health coverage, including sexual and reproductive health services; and reduced inequalities in education. Countries in North and Central Asia and the Pacific provided a relatively high level of effective coverage of children (aged 0 to 18) in social protection benefits (57.4 per cent and 47.0 per cent, respectively), significantly surpassing the regional average (18.3 per cent). The old-age pension coverage is nearly universal in North and Central Asia (99.2 per cent) and East and North-East Asia (98.8 per cent). Maternal mortality has declined by one-third in the region since 2000, and adolescent fertility declined by nearly 60 per cent between 2000 and 2023. The gap in family planning with modern methods has reduced in Asia since 2000, with Central and Southern Asia showing the largest reduction in unmet need between 2000 and 2023. Remarkable progress has been made towards improving women and girls' educational attainment.

When enrolled in schools, girls were more likely to complete primary and secondary education than boys in most Asia-Pacific countries.

Despite these gains, women and girls in the region continue to disproportionately experience poverty in both monetary and multidimensional terms. The gender poverty gap was most pronounced in Central and Southern Asia. This gap starts in early childhood, continues throughout adolescence and the prime reproductive and economically productive years (aged 25–34) and resurges in old age. The multidimensional poverty rate was considerably higher among women with disabilities than men with disabilities, and women and men without disabilities. Across the Asia-Pacific region, significant gaps persist in effective social protection coverage and adequate benefit levels due to insufficient public expenditure. Women are disadvantaged in access to social protection benefits. Less than 40 per cent of mothers with newborns receive maternity cash benefits, and only 24 countries in the region provide paid maternity leave that meets the 14-week minimum requirement according to the ILO Maternity Protection Convention 2000 (No.183). Only 30.3 per cent of women of working age are covered by an old-age pension scheme, compared to 44.1 per cent of working-age men.

Sexual and reproductive health services are largely uncovered in essential health service packages, leading to entrenched gaps in access to quality services. Many countries in South-East Asia, South and South-West Asia and the Pacific still had relatively high maternal mortality ratios between 100–299 per 100,000 live births in 2020. Young women and adolescent girls are more likely to have unmet needs for family planning with modern methods. Adolescent fertility remains a concern, especially in South-East Asia. One in five cervical cancer cases and one in four cervical cancer deaths in 2022 worldwide occurred in South Asia due to limited access to human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination.

Despite narrowing gender gaps in education attainment in the region, intersectional analysis in 30 countries shows that poor women aged 20–35 remain the furthest left behind in secondary education completion in half of the countries, and those aged 35 and above who are poor are the furthest behind in even more (21) countries. "Learning poverty" is particularly concerning in low- and middle-income countries in South Asia, where the share of children not acquiring basic proficiency in literacy by age 10 was estimated at 78 per cent in 2022. Public expenditure on education remains rather low across the region, especially in South Asia. Spending level is even lower on early childhood education, which is key for children to acquire foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Children whose mothers have no

or low education are more likely to be left furthest behind in access to early childhood education. Persistent gender stereotypes and discrimination continue to hinder women's and girls' pursuit of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education and careers. Major gaps exist in the reskilling and upskilling of women and girls, especially impacting those who are in informal and low-value job sectors and most at risk of being left behind or excluded in the changing labour market.

Persistent gender inequalities in the world of work compromise shared prosperity.

Rapid digital and technological transformation and population ageing are significantly changing the labour market and economic dependency ratios in Asia and the Pacific. The resulting economic and social implications are further intensified by existing gender inequalities in labour force participation and access to decent work.

Labour force participation rates for both women and men in the region have been on the decline since 1995, partially due to positive socioeconomic changes such as reduced poverty rates and increased youth participation in education and training, as well as population ageing. In the Pacific subregion, the gender gap (female-to-male ratio) in labour force participation for the population aged 15 and above has decreased by 12.5 per cent since 1995. The regional gender income gap narrowed since 2004. A modest reduction in the rate of female youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) was observed in the region since 2005. Women owned approximately 60 per cent of the region's micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), which have been a major contributor to regional growth.

Nonetheless, significant gender inequalities persist in the world of work in Asia and the Pacific. The regional gender gap in labour force participation has widened, with the female-to-male ratio in labour force participation rates for women and for men aged 15 and above decreased from 63.2 per cent in 1995 to 59.6 per cent in 2024. This is mainly driven by a concerningly large gap in South and South-West Asia, which is home to a growing share of the region's population. The gender gap was the most evident for the prime-working age group (aged 25–54), with women who had young children (under age 6) worst affected. Women continue to earn significantly less, earning only 44 cents for every dollar earned by men in 2021. Among all ESCAP subregions, South and South-West Asia was the subregion where women were least likely to be in the labour force (25.6 per cent in 2024), young women were most likely to be NEET (home to six Asia-Pacific countries

with the biggest gender gap in youth NEET), and the gender income gap was the largest. Women in the subregion earned only about 20 per cent of men's labour income in 2021.

Women face multifaceted disadvantages in the labour market. Gender-based occupational segregation continues to exclude women from high-skill and high-pay professions, with a general underrepresentation of women in the region's STEM workforce and in sectors that are most relevant to the digital and green economies. Women tend to concentrate in sectors often associated with poor working conditions, such as agriculture, manufacturing and retail trade and accommodation. Some 61.8 per cent of working women in the region were engaged in informal employment. This share is particularly high for women in low income and lower-middle income countries – both at approximately 84 per cent. In many countries, women were overrepresented in vulnerable employment, working as own-account workers and contributing family workers. The concentration of women in informal and vulnerable employment exposes them to poor working conditions; minimal protection against work-related contingencies, such as unemployment, work-related injuries and sickness; and a high risk of sexual violence and harassment at work. The persistent underrepresentation of women in trade unions, employers' organizations and collective bargaining processes in the region impedes improvement in working conditions and the quality of employment for women.

Furthermore, women in the region are less likely than men to own or co-own a business. When they do, their businesses are predominantly micro-sized and informal enterprises. Barriers for women-owned businesses to access credit and capital remains a common challenge, compounded by other barriers such as unfavourable business regulatory frameworks, lack of business management skills and lack of access to market and support networks.

The disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work undertaken by women and girls is a main contributing factor to gender inequalities in the world of work. In 13 out of 15 Asia-Pacific countries with data, the time women and girls spent on unpaid care and domestic work was two to five times more than men. These responsibilities create interruptions in women's economic participation and reinforce a broad range of discriminatory labour market practices. As a result, the closing of gender gaps in education has not translated into narrowed gender gaps in the labour market. As the demand for care in the region grows due to demographic shifts and climate and environmental crises, unpaid care and domestic responsibilities have increasingly profound and complex implications for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

Gender-based violence remains a threat to women and girls.

Gender-based violence is rooted in entrenched gender social norms about men's entitlement and privilege over women, unequal gender power relations and socially prescribed gender roles. The impacts of violence extend far beyond immediate physical and emotional trauma for victims/survivors that can last throughout their lifetime. The burden of violence also imposes an economic toll on the health, social services and justice sectors, and harms society by considerably undermining women's productivity.

Some Governments in the Asia-Pacific region have made progress toward eliminating violence against women and girls through a multi-sectoral approach with whole-of-society engagement. For example, countries in South Asia led the global decline in child marriage through effective interventions, such as cash or in-kind transfers, complemented by training in gender-transformative life skills and access to sexual and reproductive health services. The percentage of women aged 20–24 who were first married or in union before age 18 nearly halved between 2012 and 2022. A significant 78 per cent of all child marriages averted worldwide between 1997 and 2022 occurred in South Asia. There has been an increased emphasis on strengthening laws, policies and institutional mechanisms to eradicate impunity and societal tolerance for violence; investing in holistic prevention measures to address root causes of and risk factors for violence; providing multi-sectoral and victim/survivor-centred services; and improving data collection and use to inform evidence-based and culturally appropriate interventions.

Despite positive advancements in violence prevention and response, the prevalence of violence against women and girls remains alarmingly high in Asia and the Pacific. Such violence manifests itself on a continuum of multiple, interrelated and reoccurring forms, encompassing intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, femicide, child marriage, trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling, technology-facilitated violence and other harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation and virginity testing. For example, the lifetime prevalence of physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence for women aged 15–49 was estimated to be 27 per cent in Asia and 30 per cent in Oceania. South Asia was still home to 290 million child brides, accounting for 45 per cent of the global total. Compared to the progress made between 2012 and 2022, the pace must be seven times faster to eradicate child marriage in this subregion by 2030. Furthermore, women and girls were significantly overrepresented among detected trafficking victims/survivors in East Asia and the Pacific (79 per cent) and Central Asia (64 per cent). It is critical to recognize that the prevalence of violence against women and girls is generally underestimated due to challenges related to data collection and exclusion of certain groups, such as adolescents, older women, women with disabilities, migrants and refugees, from population-based surveys. On the other hand, underreporting of violence cases to the police, health systems and social services is not uncommon, largely attributed to stigma and the fear of blame and repercussions.

Eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls is often obstructed by challenges, such as deeply rooted harmful social norms, beliefs and behaviours; gaps in legal and policy frameworks, coupled with poor implementation and monitoring; insufficient access to coordinated and comprehensive services for victims/survivors; lack of reliable, comparable and disaggregated data and underutilization of existing data; and inadequate financing and resources allocated to combat violence. Moreover, efforts to tackle gender-based violence to date have primarily centred on response after violence has occurred, while systematic long-term prevention has received relatively less attention and investment. Enhanced focus on evaluation is also required to support evidence-driven investment in interventions that have been proven effective.

Meaningful participation is still beyond reach to many women and girls.

Meaningful participation in public life denotes that women and girls can exercise their agency, leadership and experiences to influence all matters in the broader development and humanitarian contexts. Gender-responsive governance requires the establishment of institutional mechanisms, planning and budgeting processes that hold governments accountable for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls and enable meaningful participation of women and girls and their representative organizations in decision making and governance processes.

The Asia-Pacific region has achieved commendable progress in improving women's representation in political participation. In 2024, women held 21.4 per cent of parliamentary seats in the region, increased from 12.7 per cent in 2000. Some subregions, notably North and Central Asia, the Pacific and South-East Asia, have made significant strides since 2015. Affirmative measures, such as electoral quotas, have been adopted in a number of countries in the region. These measures have positive effects on increasing women's political

representation, when coupled with targeted capacity-building for women in politics, gender-responsive practices in political parties and voter education. A number of countries in the region have also undertaken gender-responsive budgeting to ensure the delivery of their commitments to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

However, women's representation across all three branches of government in the region still falls short of achieving parity. Despite an upward trend, women's representation in national parliaments still fell below the global average. In South and South-West Asia, an even lower share (17.2 per cent) of parliamentary seats were held by women. In national parliaments, women accounted for merely 16.1 per cent of speakers and 20.3 per cent of chairs of parliamentary committees. Women also remained underrepresented in ministerial positions (12.5 per cent) and judges or magistrates (34.1 per cent) in the region. Among 49 Asia-Pacific countries and territories with data, only four reported that women held at least half of managerial positions in public and private sectors. In 20 countries and territories, the proportion of women in managerial positions was below the world average of 28.2 per cent. When women do lead, biased gender norms continue to confine them predominantly in roles and functions related to gender, women, children and family affairs.

Governance systems in the region are largely not gender responsive. National women's machineries play an instrumental role in prioritizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls on the national development agenda and facilitating gender mainstreaming across government. However, they are often marginalized in governance systems. Among the 40 Asia-Pacific countries that responded to the global survey on the Beijing+30 review, 18 reported that their national women's machineries experienced serious underfunding and understaffing. In only 25 countries, national human rights institutions had specific mandates related to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Despite their contributions to gender-responsive governance, the engagement of women's civil society organizations has been challenged by shrinking civic spaces, backlash against gender equality and serious underfunding. Moreover, countries in the region generally lack comprehensive systems to allocate, track and assess impacts of budgetary resources for gender equality. Increasing austerity measures adopted by countries in the region in face of economic fallouts of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the global debt crisis have threatened to worsen public financial allocation for gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Women and girls are denied the agency to shape the peace and security agenda.

Gender equality is a significant predictor for peace and security. The more gender-equal a society, the less likely conflict will be resolved with violence. A growing share of the population in Asia and the Pacific and globally are being affected by both traditional and emerging security threats, ranging from armed conflict and organized violence to violent extremism, terrorism, climate-induced threats and cybersecurity risks. Increased peace and security risks led to over 50 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and over 15 million forcibly displaced or stateless persons in Asia and the Pacific in 2024. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to multidimensional deprivations and violence and abuse in conflict and emergency settings. Peaceful and just societies cannot be achieved without addressing the dire situation of women and girls in conflict and emergency situations and empowering them to exercise their agency and leadership.

As of May 2024, 16 countries in Asia and the Pacific have adopted national action plans on women, peace and security (WPS), out of which 12 are still active. Most national plans cover all four pillars of the WPS agenda, including participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery. At the subregional level, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) adopted an active regional plan of action in late 2022. These action plans address emerging security risks, account for the differentiated situations and needs of diverse groups and outline strategies to facilitate their meaningful participation. The ASEAN regional action plan sheds light on cross-border collaboration to address peace and security threats. However, the implementation of these action plans is often hindered by weak political will and insufficient funding, monitoring and evaluation. The implementation is challenged by political circumstances that sideline the WPS agenda in some countries and by the shrinking civic space for meaningful engagement of civil society actors.

Women and girls in the region are not sufficiently empowered to participate in and lead peace negotiations, peacekeeping and community peace building processes, despite evidence showing the positive effects of their participation and leadership. Globally, only one out of 18 peace agreements reached in 2022 was signed or witnessed by a women's group representative. Only 15 out of 26 troop-contributing countries in Asia and the Pacific met or exceeded the 21 per cent target of women's representation among all military observers and staff officers deployed in 2024, set by the United Nations

Department of Peace Operations. Meanwhile, major gaps remain in access to justice for women and girls in the region. None of the legal reforms concerning the rights of women and girls conducted around the world between 2022 and 2023 were undertaken in South Asia, and only 9 per cent of them occurred in East Asia and the Pacific. The implementation of existing legal protection mechanisms is weakened due to underrepresentation of women in justice systems and a lack of gender-responsiveness in justice system operations. Justice systems face particular challenges in delivering timely, accessible and quality services to women and girls in conflict-affected contexts. These challenges indicate the critical need for countries in the region to undertake more proactive legislative reforms and improve the capacity of formal and informal justice systems to provide gender-responsive services for all.

Climate and environmental action do not fully integrate gender concerns.

Gender inequality, coupled with environmental degradation and climate crises, is considered the most formidable sustainable development challenge in the current era. Women, men, girls and boys interact with the environment and are impacted by environmental factors differently. Women and girls, particularly those from indigenous and local communities, are powerful agents of change for improved environmental conservation outcomes, enhanced governance and a more equitable distribution of benefits.

Many Governments in the region have made efforts to improve women's and girls' access to natural resources and their derivative products over the past decades. In Central and Southern Asia, the number of women and girls drinking water from unimproved sources or surface water decreased from 107 million in 2000 to 31 million in 2022. In Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, this number had reduced by 84.0 per cent, from 188 million in 2000 to 30 million in 2022. In Eastern Asia, food insecurity represents a less significant concern than other subregions, and women tend to be more food secure than men. In addition, Governments have taken action to promote women's participation and leadership in key sectors related to natural resource management, such as agrifood systems, the water sector and the renewable energy industry. Good practices on integrating gender perspectives into disaster risk reduction efforts across all four priorities of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, as well as enhancing policy frameworks to address the interlinkages of gender and climate change, have been identified across the region.

Yet, women and girls continue to experience significant challenges in natural resource access and management. In four out of the nine countries with data, men are at least twice as likely as women to have ownership or secure rights over agricultural land. Only 15 per cent of the population in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) and 64 per cent in Southern Asia primarily relied on clean fuels and technology, both below the world average of 71 per cent in 2021. Women and girls often bear the brunt of restricted access to affordable and clean energy given the disproportionate share of domestic chores they carry out. Approximately 30–40 per cent of all workers in agrifood systems were women in Asia and the Pacific. Despite the significance of agrifood systems for women's livelihoods and their families' well-being, particularly in some subregions such as Southern Asia, women are often confined to irregular, informal, part-time, low-skilled and labour-intensive work under highly unfavourable conditions. Moreover, women are severely underrepresented in integrated water resources management.

The impacts of disasters and climate change are not gender neutral. Disasters and climate factors are often associated with worsening gender-related outcomes for women and girls, such as diminished health, increased care and domestic work, heightened risks of gender-based violence and impaired employment prospects. While women and girls are increasingly engaged in disaster risk reduction and climate action in the region, their participation and leadership still fall short of critical influence in decision-making. Disaster management institutions remain predominantly led by men in most Asia-Pacific countries. In the 49 Asia-Pacific countries with Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) in 2023, 37 countries mentioned gender in their NDCs but the majority only made passing references to gender specific aspects of the challenge. Women were identified as vulnerable to climate change in 8 of these NDCs while only 10 NDCs acknowledged women as agents of change and decision-makers essential for driving climate action.

Entrenched gender social norms and stereotypes, as well as gendered power relations, result in persistent resistance from both male and female policymakers to implementing gender-responsive and transformative climate and environmental action. In addition to closing the notable data gap to better understand the gender-environment nexus, achieving environmental sustainability with gender equality at its core requires significantly increased public and private financing, especially for women's organizations and enterprises engaged in natural resource management, disaster risk reduction and climate mitigation and adaptation.

Public Employment Services (PES) Counsellors' workshop in Indonesia, focusing on career guidance and skills development.
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CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE INVESTMENT PRIORITIES

The Asia-Pacific region has made noticeable progress towards achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. However, critical challenges remain persistent. The opportunities brought about by the transition towards the green, digital and care economies have immense potential to catalyse transformative changes for all, if gender equality is made an integral part of the development agenda. Actions and resources must be prioritized to accelerate progress in areas where the largest gaps remain, capitalize on key transitions of strategic importance, and address cross-cutting issues that provide the foundation for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

Accelerate actions in where the largest gaps remain since 1995

(a) Advancing women's economic empowerment and resilience is of strategic importance to the region's economic growth and societal development. Proactive and targeted measures are needed to protect income security, boost decent work and support women's entrepreneurship, taking into account the implications of multiplying global crises and megatrends.

✛ **Gender-responsive social protection** should be strategized not as a welfare expenditure but an enabler for sustainable growth. Countries are strongly encouraged to increase public spending on social protection, extend effective coverage and adequate benefits to women and girls throughout the life cycle, reaching those who are not currently protected, and redress the implications of unpaid care and domestic work to enable women to enter, stay and excel in the labour market on an equal footing with men.

✛ **Gender-inclusive labour market measures** should focus on equipping women and girls with skills that meet evolving labour market demands, creating not only more jobs but decent work, and investing in the care economy to better enable women to join the labour force. These labour market measures need to be grounded in sustainable, inclusive human capital accumulation that relies on equitable, quality education and health care, including sexual and reproductive health services. Action should focus on closing the gender gaps in skills for women and girls to shine in the growing digital and green sectors. Particular efforts are needed in reskilling, upskilling and transition-to-work support for women and girls who are at a higher risk of being excluded in the labour market amidst these transitions, and in making new and emerging jobs decent, through strengthened public-private partnerships.

✛ **Enabling entrepreneurial ecosystems** need to be built to empower women to develop and grow their businesses, including in the digital and green economies. Such ecosystems should include gender-friendly business governance processes that enable women to register and formalize their businesses; favourable taxation and credit policies for women-owned businesses; diversified solutions to capital access; public and procurement mechanisms to expand market access for women-owned businesses; and capacity-building programmes for women entrepreneurs to build essential business skills. Particular attention is required to women-owned MSMEs which are extremely active in the region's economy overall but remain vulnerable to shocks.

(b) Enhancing women's representation, participation and leadership is important to systemically shift the power imbalance and to catalyse changes across sectors. There is a need to go beyond non-discrimination measures and take a more proactive, enabling approach.

✛ **Creating a conducive environment for women's meaningful participation and leadership** requires intentional reform in political and governance systems. Countries are strongly encouraged to adopt affirmative measures, such as gender and equity quotas, for electoral candidates and parliamentary seats; facilitate political parties to adopt more gender-equal candidate nomination practices and allocate funding to support women candidates; engage election commissions to roll out gender-inclusive voter education and address gender-specific barriers; mandate gender-responsive procedures and practices related to recruitment, appointment, performance assessment and promotion; designate resources to support women's leadership capacity-building; and impose strong measures against violence and harassment targeting women politicians, activists and voters both online and offline. Similar reforms are needed in the private sector to place more women in management and leadership pipelines and positions.

✛ **Breaking down gendered occupational segregation in management and leadership** should be part of the strategy. Deliberate efforts are required in politics, governance systems and the private sector to put more women into professional, management and leadership pipelines across sectors. This is especially true in the governance institutions of key sectors such as digital technology, climate change, finance, peace and security. Investment is needed in long-term norm-changing campaigns to transform the common undervaluation of "feminized" sectors and the stereotypical division of gender roles.

(c) Eliminating gender-based violence (GBV) and strengthening access to justice continue to require priority action in the region.

✛ **Institutionalizing action plans for GBV prevention and response** at the national and subnational levels is necessary. Such action plans should set clear objectives, indicators and targets. They need to be supported by a well-resourced budget and be accompanied by the clear accountability of all actors involved and sound mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation. Action plans must account for intersectional discrimination and risk factors that contribute to GBV, including sexual orientation and gender identity, age, disability, ethnicity, migrant status, refugee status and other socioeconomic factors, and tailor measures to address the differentiated needs of individuals of diverse backgrounds. More investment is needed to prevent violence from happening through programmes that engage women, men, girls and boys to catalyse behaviour and social norm changes. Equally important is to address economic and social stressors and build the resilience of people and communities; develop safe, gender-friendly public spaces, transportation and digital environments; and strengthen zero-tolerance laws and policies and community policing. Victims/survivors-centred response measures and services need to be further strengthened across law enforcement, justice systems, education institutions, health systems and social and community service sectors.

✛ **Tackling technology-facilitated gender-based violence and harmful practices** deserves urgent action. Strong collaboration among governments, the technology sector, women's organizations, civil society and national human rights institutions is pivotal to establishing sound regulatory frameworks; improving risk identification, perpetrator tracking and accountability procedures; and updating knowledge and capacity of GBV first responders. Cross-sector collaboration is also needed to change the design (including algorithms), dissemination and use of digital technologies to prevent gender biases and stereotypes and to combat gender-based violence.

✛ **Addressing gender-based violence in the peace and security context** requires particular attention from all actors in the region, given the heightened global peace and security risks Collaborative actions must be taken to identify risks of women's human rights violation, incorporate interventions to build economic and social resilience of women and girls and the local communities affected, provide victims/survivors-centred support, restore justice services and support transitional justice systems in the conflict-affected and emergency contexts.

Harness key transitions to deliver gender equality

(a) Making the just (green) transition gender-responsive

The climate crisis is marked by a series of interconnected challenges. Such challenges include extreme economic inequalities, the care crisis, an upsurge in violence and protracted conflicts, and deficits in democratic governance. The gender-differentiated impacts of climate change, which disproportionately disadvantage women and girls, are rooted in systemic gender-based discrimination and societal expectations. Nonetheless, women and girls are largely excluded from decision-making related to climate action and sectors involving in the green and blue economies. A just transition necessitates sufficient investment in gender-responsive public services, social protection, healthcare systems and legal reforms that are adapted to climate change and its gendered effects. In the pursuit of climate justice, countries need to recognize the role of women and girls as agents of change, by integrating their voices and perspectives into decision-making at all levels and relying on their leadership to develop and implement gender-responsive climate mitigation and adaptation policies.

Climate financing instruments need to designate resources to support women and girls to recover livelihood and income loss from climate change, start and grow climate-resilient livelihoods and businesses and access climate-resilient social protection. Importantly, climate mitigation and adaptation actions should address the implication of climate change on increasing unpaid care, domestic and communal responsibilities, disproportionately undertaken by women and girls. Climate-induced peace and security concerns, especially in contexts where natural resources are scarce and the occurrence of disasters is increasingly frequent, should also be tackled.

(b) Promoting ethical, inclusive digital ecosystems for gender equality

Digital and emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), present economic and educational opportunities and offer new solutions to development challenges. Yet the digital transition may inherit and intensify pre-existing inequalities by further concentrating power in the hands of those who control the latest technologies. To harness digital and technological transformation for gender equality, action has to go beyond closing gender divides in digital connectivity and literacy and promote ethical, inclusive and gender-responsive digital innovation. Governments and digital technology companies

need to act urgently to protect human rights and eliminate discrimination in digital spaces and in the development, distribution and use of emerging technologies by applying a gender dimension to strengthening regulatory frameworks, corporate accountability and industry action. A global multistakeholder digital governance mechanism is urgently needed to facilitate governance dialogues and cooperation, through an inclusive approach that accounts for the interests of diverse population groups, including those in vulnerable situations, especially in the different countries of the Global South.

Countries need to make strategic investments in digital public infrastructure, such as public data pools and datasets, public data exchange protocols, cloud infrastructure, digital payment means and other digital business tools which use emerging technologies such as AI. This is necessary for women-owned businesses to benefit from and thrive in the booming digital economy. Investment is required to build technical, social and legal expertise related to digital governance. Closing gender divides to increase women's representation in talent pools, workforces and institutions that design, develop and govern digital and emerging technologies is critical. Governments and digital technology companies are strongly encouraged to strengthen multi-stakeholder and multi-disciplinary cooperation at the regional and global levels to promote ethical and inclusive digital ecosystems for gender equality.

(c) Investing in the care economy for broad-based empowerment of women and girls

Unpaid care and domestic work constitute one of the biggest contributors to the disadvantages women and girls face in their participation across the political, social and economic domains. The paradigm of care must be shifted from understanding care as a private responsibility or a welfare service to acknowledging it as a public good of social and economic significance. Social protection schemes should enable families to access affordable and quality care services and compensate for the loss of income for unpaid caregivers who are often women. Labour market and workplace policies and measures should bring in gender perspectives to support women in mitigating the impacts of unpaid care and domestic responsibilities and be mindful of the unintended consequence of reinforcing women's roles as carers. Investment in public and paid care services is equally necessary to redistribute care work between the family, the State and the market while creating formal and decent job opportunities in the care sector. Infrastructure investments should incorporate care-responsive considerations to reduce women's time spent on resource collection and management and other domestic or communal responsibilities.

The unequal division of care responsibilities between women and men needs to be transformed through formal laws and policy incentives, such as shared parental leaves, and socialization processes through school education, media campaigns and community mobilization.

Strengthen foundations to accelerate progress: gender norms transformation, data insights, financing and partnership mechanisms

(a) Transforming gender social norms

Biased and harmful social norms underlie gender inequalities that women and girls experience across all dimensions of their life. The impacts extend beyond individual experiences, including those of men and boys, and hinder economic and societal progress. Transforming these biased and harmful gender norms should be an integral objective to all actions for advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. To achieve this, countries should take deliberate action to replace gender biases and stereotypes, discriminatory social expectations and normalization of gender-based violence with progressive, healthy gender norms in contents and practices of parenting, education in both formal and informal settings, religious activities and the media. Gender-responsive policy incentives and institutional reforms, such as paternity and parental leaves and gender-responsive budgeting, are also needed to transform norms that normalize discriminatory practices, such as unequal labour division at home, occupational segregation and gender hierarchies in workplaces and institutions. Moreover, to transform gender norms, legislative reforms must proactively and explicitly support gender equality. This must include adopting legislation that outlaws gender-based violence and stipulates gender and equity quotas in electoral candidacy and parliaments.

(b) Bridging gaps in gender data and statistics

Gender data and statistics are critical to enable robust gender analysis, policymaking, progress monitoring and impact assessment to close gender gaps and empower women and girls. Yet, significant gender data gaps persist across the Asia-Pacific region. It is crucial to prioritize investment in strengthening data collection and analysis for existing and emerging regional and national priorities where gender data gaps are the largest, such as care, sexual and reproductive health, women's leadership and influence, female genital mutilation and cutting, technology-facilitated gender-based violence, and climate change. Special attention should be paid to data needed to account for the experiences of groups in vulnerable situations who are often excluded in data collection efforts. Increased research and technical consultations are also needed to improve methods, standards and guidelines for gender data production, analysis, communications and use. There is an urgent need to address political, institutional, financial and technical shortfalls that perpetuate data gaps, and to better connect data producers and users.

(c) Boosting gender-smart financing

Despite an increasing consensus on the urgency of adequate financing for gender equality, the actual allocation of funds in the Asia-Pacific region remains marginal relative to the scale of interventions needed and is at risk of being sidelined by other challenges. Governments, the private sector and development partners need to urgently boost gender-smart financing through diversified schemes. Such schemes include gender-responsive budgeting; gender-responsive fiscal policies, revenue-raising policies and progressive taxation strategies; sustainable and gender-inclusive debt instruments, such as social and sustainability bonds and loans; dedicated gender components in climate and environment finance; improved access to capital for women-owned businesses through microcredit, venture capital, private equity and other blended finance tools; and social impact investment.

(d) Fostering innovative partnerships

More productive multi-stakeholder partnerships are needed to accelerate progress in gender equality, leveraging North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation. The roles of different stakeholders, including but not limited to Governments, the private sector, women's CSOs and youth organizations, need to be redefined and strengthened, along with much more conducive multi-stakeholder collaborative mechanisms. Partnerships could help countries seize opportunities presented in key transitions towards the green, digital and care economies; mobilize diversified and amplified financial resources; and fill in critical gender data gaps that engage not only traditional data stakeholders, such as national statistical offices and academia, but also civil society and the private sector. Furthermore, partnerships should be fostered to assist countries and subregions where local capacities are limited but where large gender gaps and inequalities remain and significantly impact socioeconomic development.

PART

I

SETTING THE CONTEXT
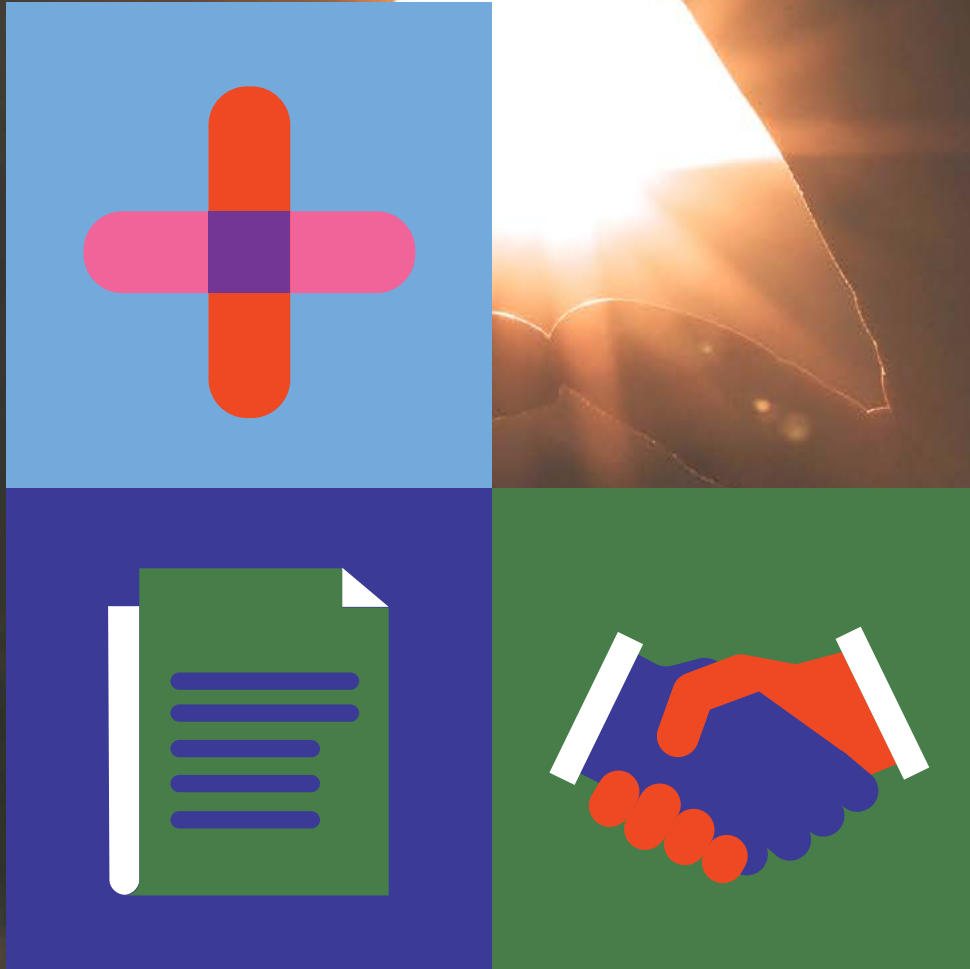
CHAPTER 1

Towards transformative change: Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

Chandra Kala Thapa, one of many smallholder women farmers from Ranichuri village in Sindhuli district. © UN Women/Narendra Shrestha

The regional synthesis report is an analysis of the progress made towards implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) in Asia and the Pacific. This assessment has been framed by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[1]

Underpinned by data and statistics, secondary research and information submitted by member States, this synthesis report assesses the current state of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in Asia and the Pacific. The report showcases actions taken by member States to implement the BPfA as well as identifying remaining challenges. It identifies promising practices which counter discriminatory norms and practices, catalyse gender-transformative change, demonstrate strong political will and contribute to closing the knowledge gap on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. The findings of the report are intended to inform the strengthening of such policies, the prioritization of relevant actions and increased funding for gender equality. The ambition is to promote partnerships among governments and key stakeholders, particularly civil society organizations such as women's organizations, academia and the private sector, for gender-transformative actions in Asia and the Pacific.

1.1 THE BEIJING+30 REVIEW

1.1.1 Background and objective

The BPfA was adopted in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women and is the most comprehensive and significant framework for advancing the global agenda for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.[2] It covers 12 critical areas of concern: women and poverty; education and training of women; women and health; violence against women; women and armed conflict; women and the economy; women in power and decision-making; institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women; the human rights of women; women and the media; women and the environment; and the girl child.

The understanding of these areas of concern has evolved since the adoption of the BPfA in 1995. Poverty is now better understood from a multidimensional perspective. Our understanding of the economy has been expanded to encompass issues of empowerment. Discussion on the environment now recognizes the important role of women and girls in climate action. The concept of peace and security has evolved beyond armed conflict in the light of new threats, such as cybersecurity risks and climate-induced security risks. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has brought greater attention to the disproportionately high amount of unpaid care work and domestic responsibilities

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1   For more information, see the event website: https://www.unescap.org/events/2024/asia-pacific-ministerial-conference-beijing30-review.
2   *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4–15 September 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.13), chap. I, resolution 1, annexes I and II.

shouldered by women. Digitalization and the transformative evolution of technology including Artificial Intelligence (AI), and demographic shifts such as rapid population ageing, are emerging issues which were not foreseen when the BPfA was drafted. The importance of financing for gender equality is also better understood as the critical lever for change.

Reviews of the BPfA have been conducted regionally and globally every five years since 1995 to facilitate the tracking of its implementation.[3] The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, adopted in 2015, also provide a framework for accelerated action.[4] The most recent global review of the BPfA in the context of the 2030 Agenda took place at the sixty-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2020. The Commission adopted the Political Declaration on the Occasion of the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women.[5] Immediately preceding the global review, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) convened the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on the Beijing+25 Review in November 2019 at which ESCAP member States adopted the Asia-Pacific Declaration on Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Beijing+25 Review.[6]

ECOSOC Resolution E/RES/2022/5 on the thirtieth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women called upon Member States to undertake comprehensive national-level reviews of the progress made and challenges encountered in the implementation of the BPfA. Within this context, the regional commissions of the United Nations are undertaking regional reviews to inform the outcomes of intergovernmental processes at the regional level and feed into the sixty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women.[7] ESCAP is leading the Asia-Pacific regional intergovernmental review of the implementation of the BPfA in collaboration with UN-Women and in consultation with all relevant stakeholders. This regional review directly engages ESCAP member States and a broad range of stakeholders in the stock-taking of progress and the identification of priority actions to accelerate the advancement of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in the Asia-Pacific region.

1.1.2 Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this synthesis report is informed by the vision of the BPfA for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls and the 2030 Agenda's pledge to "leave no one behind". The report is prepared to present an up-to-date picture of the state of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in Asia and the Pacific to inform future-oriented strategies and actions.[8]

To assess progress towards the 12 critical areas of concern of the BPfA in the context of the 2030 Agenda, six thematic areas that highlight the alignment between the BPfA and the 2030 Agenda are conceptualized as follows:

- Poverty reduction and human capital development covers BPfA critical areas of concern A (women and poverty), B (education and training of women) and C (women and health), as well as SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (health and well-being), SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 5 (gender equality).

- Shared prosperity and decent work reviews BPfA critical area of concern F (women and the economy) in alignment with SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 8 (decent work and inclusive growth).

- Freedom from gender-based violence integrates BPfA critical areas of concern D (violence against women) and J (women and the media) in alignment with SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions).

- Meaningful participation and gender-responsive governance corresponds to BPfA critical areas of concern G (women in power and decision-making) and H (institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women), as well as SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) and SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals).

- Peaceful and just societies covers BPfA critical area of concern E (women and armed conflict) and has been expanded to cover emerging forms of security issues that encompass cybersecurity and climate security; BPfA critical area of concern D that focuses on violence against women; and BPfA critical area of concern I (human rights of women) that concerns access to justice. It is also aligned with SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions).

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3   A/RES/S-23/2.

4   Interagency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANWGE), *25 years after Beijing: A review of the UN system's support for the implementation of the Platform for Action, 2014-2019* (2020).

5   United Nations, Economic and Social Council, "Political declaration on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women", E/CN.6/2020/L.1.

6   United Nations, ESCAP, "Asia-Pacific Declaration on Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Beijing+25 Review", ESCAP/MCBR/2019/2/Add.1*.

7   United Nations, Economic and Social Council, "Resolution adopted by the Economic and Social Council on 8 June 2022, Thirtieth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women", E/RES/2022/5.

8   It is beyond the objective and the scope of this report to account for every nuance and the full complexity of each thematic area and provide comprehensive recommendations for the transformation of each area. To this end, the bibliography which contains a vast range of latest available resources from reliable sources provides opportunities for acquiring extensive discussions in various issue areas.

✚ Gender and the environment looks into BPfA critical area of concern K (women and the environment) in alignment with SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation), SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy), SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities), SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 14 (life below water) and SDG 15 (life on land).

BPfA critical area of concern L (The girl child) is mainstreamed, where appropriate, throughout the thematic areas.

1.1.3   Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a key element of the conceptualization of this report. Women and girls represent a diverse group, with experiences that vary significantly based on a range of intersecting identities such as age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, disability, and refugee, displacement or migrant status. Where possible, this report includes intersectional analysis to better understand the distinct needs of women and girls of different identities, as well as their agency and representation in different areas of decision making. However, the extent of such intersectional analysis has been limited by the availability of robust data disaggregated by sex and other determinants. Where data limitations are most acute, accounting fully for a particular group of women and girls facing intersectional forms of discrimination is challenging. In these areas, there is an urgent need for governments and other stakeholders to support further data collection and research.

1.1.4   Use of data, statistics and literature

Employing a broad research approach, the synthesis report draws on five main sources of information: i) official data and statistics; ii) reports and publications published by United Nations entities and other international organizations, as well as peer-reviewed secondary literature; iii) national reports and survey responses submitted by ESCAP member States for the Beijing+30 review; iv) States Parties' reports submitted for the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee); and v) General recommendations by the CEDAW Committee and agreed conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). While the report discusses progress over the previous three decades where possible and relevant, the main focus is placed on the progress made and actions

taken since the Beijing+25 regional review took place in 2019.[9] As far as possible, efforts have been made to ensure a wide subregional and country representation across the analysis and discussions.

(a) Official data and statistics

The data and statistics used in this report include official SDG indicator data and other development indicators compiled by relevant custodian entities, consisting of United Nations agencies, funds and programmes and other intergovernmental organizations such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). Principle sources of data and statistics highlighted in this report include the ESCAP Statistical Database, the SDG Global Database, the ILOSTAT of the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Women, Business and the Law 2.0 Database of the World Bank and the IPU Parline Database (see Annex 1 for more information).

Considering the aim of highlighting recent progress and gaps towards achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in the Asia-Pacific region, priority was given to identifying the most up-to-date, sex-disaggregated statistics covering as many Asia-Pacific countries and territories as possible. A general challenge and limitation in this regard is that the most recent observed data, such as SDG indicator data, may be outdated or contain only one data point for a given country. This makes it difficult to accurately account for the latest situations or current trends. Furthermore, while the picture varies from indicator to indicator, country-level data availability is an overall challenge as each indicator generally only includes values for a subset of ESCAP members and associate members, creating challenges for regional and subregional aggregations. Where data availability allows, the aim is to assess regional and subregional trends over time. However, challenges with data availability sometimes limit the analysis to country snapshots of a subset of ESCAP members and associate members. Where available and appropriate, existing modelled estimates developed by the World Bank and United Nations entities such as ILO have served to bridge some of these data gaps.

(b) Published reports by the United Nations system and international organizations, as well as peer-reviewed literature

Reports and publications of United Nations entities and international organizations are a second source of information underpinning this report. These include annual and thematic reports, working papers, policy briefs and other types of publications

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9   Please see the 2019 regional review report for more information: United Nations, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and UN-Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, "The Long Road to Equality: Taking stock of the situation of women and girls in Asia and the Pacific for Beijing+25" (Bangkok, 2020).

issued by entities within the United Nations systems or by other international organizations, such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and IPU. In this regard, a comprehensive literature review was conducted for each of the thematic areas with the aim of identifying the most relevant and up-to-date literature that could bridge information gaps and contribute to the narratives of the report. An emphasis was placed on recent publications issued after 2019. In addition, peer-reviewed secondary literature, such as studies and policy reports from other recognized sources, has been used, albeit to a limited extent.

(c) National reports and survey responses for the regional Beijing+30 review

To gain the perspectives and national contexts of member States, ESCAP member States were invited to complete a survey and produce national reports on progress made and gaps in the implementation of the BPfA since the Beijing+25 regional review conducted in 2019. Among the 49 ESCAP member States which were invited to participate in the regional review, 37 member States submitted a national report (as of 23 August 2024) and 40 responded to the survey (as of 18 July 2024).[10] Findings of the quantitative assessment of the survey responses and the qualitative analysis of the national reports are included throughout this report.

(d) States Parties' reports for the Universal Periodic Review and to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

The report refers to States Parties' reports submitted for the UPR and to the CEDAW Committee for identifying country-level promising practices and recommendations from the respective review bodies. Focus has been given to States Parties' reports submitted since the year of 2019.

(e) General recommendations by the CEDAW Committee and agreed conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women

The report references general recommendations by the CEDAW Committee and agreed conclusions of the CSW, especially those adopted in the past decade, to provide strategic insights and recommendations on issues affecting women and girls that require urgent attention and action.

1.1.5 Countries and territories covered by regional and subregional groupings

With the intention to capture progress and gaps across all 58 ESCAP members and associate members geographically located in the region and highlight regional and subregional trends and patterns that could pinpoint actions and investment going forward, efforts have been made to analyse and present data and statistics in line with ESCAP's definition of the Asia-Pacific region[11] and five subregions: East and North-East Asia, North and Central Asia, the Pacific, South-East Asia and South and South-West Asia.[12] However, given the vast range of topics covered and the large volume of data and statistics used and literature cited, different regional and subregional groupings may be used. It is important to note that the Asia-Pacific region may include a list of different countries and territories according to definition by different United Nations entities or international organizations. The division of subregions may also vary, despite significant overlaps (see Annex 2 for detailed information).

1.1.6 Report structure

This report is divided into three parts.

Part I. Setting the context includes this chapter (**Chapter 1**) that introduces the BPfA and the objectives of the global and regional Beijing+30 reviews, the conceptual framework and methodology, as well as the structure of the report. It then provides a brief overview of progress, gaps and challenges pertaining to the advancement of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in Asia and the Pacific. It examines three key megatrends that shape the agenda in the region: climate and environmental crises, demographic shifts, and digital and technological transformation. When discussing these megatrends, emphasis is given to both the compounding challenges faced by women and girls that would require mitigation and the "silver linings" these megatrends present, including new opportunities and solutions that could be made possible to mitigate pre-existing risks and/or boost investment towards gender-transformative outcomes.

Part II. The pursuit of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in Asia and the Pacific contains a detailed review of the implementation of BPfA in the Asia-Pacific region as per the six thematic areas presented under

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10   Only ESCAP members were invited to participate in the survey and submit national reports while the 9 associated members were not. Due to time constraints, only survey responses received by 18 July 2024 and national reports submitted by 23 August 2024 were included in the analysis for this report. See Annex 1 for the lists of countries that submitted survey responses and national reports by the respective cut-off dates.

11   See ESCAP members and associate members at https://unescap.org/about/member-states. ESCAP statistical compilation excludes four members which are not geographically based in the Asia-Pacific region, including France, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America.

12   See countries and territories covered in each subregion at https://unescap.org/subregional-office.

section 1.3 **Conceptual framework and methodology**. Key analysis and findings across the six thematic areas are presented in chapters 2–7 listed below. Each chapter examines progress, gaps, challenges and promising practices from the Asia-Pacific region.

Chapter 2. Poverty reduction and human capital development focuses on efforts to eradicate poverty, both monetary and multidimensional, and to bolster women and girls' access to social protection by addressing gaps in access, coverage and benefit level. In addition, chapter 2 also covers the topics of sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, as well as quality education and skills development.

Chapter 3. Shared prosperity and decent work covers the advancement of gender equality in the world of work, placing an emphasis on addressing gender gaps in access to the labour market, decent work, the care economy, and women's entrepreneurship.

Chapter 4. Freedom from gender-based violence addresses different forms of violence against women and girls, including intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, femicide, child marriage, trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling, technology-facilitated violence, and other harmful practices with a view towards preventing and responding to violence.

Chapter 5. Meaningful participation and gender-responsive governance covers women and girls' representation in leadership and decision-making, focusing on women's representation and leadership in all three branches of the government and in the private sector. It also covers the roles of national women's machineries and women's civil society organizations in advancing the BPfA and the 2030 Agenda. Additionally, the state of gender-responsive budgeting in Asia-Pacific countries is reviewed and discussed.

Chapter 6. Peaceful and just societies encompasses the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda, considering emerging security threats, such as cybersecurity risks and climate-induced security risks. It includes a review of national action plans and policies on WPS in the region; the participation of women in peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding throughout the full cycle of conflicts; the protection of women and girls from conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence; and access to justice for women and girls in all their diversity.

Chapter 7. Gender and the environment centres on the gender dimensions of access to natural resources and the gender-differentiated impacts of disasters and climate change. It highlights the necessity of strengthening the integration of gender perspectives and women's participation in natural resource management, disaster risk reduction and climate action.

Part III. The way forward includes the concluding chapter (**Chapter 8**) which proposes three sets of regional strategies to address areas where major gaps persist. The strategies focus on women's economic empowerment and resilience; women's representation, participation and leadership; and gender-based violence and access to justice. They identify means of harnessing key transitions – the just (green) transition, digital and technological transformation, and the care economy – in ways that support gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Due consideration is given to how progress can be accelerated towards transforming gender social norms, bridging gender data and statistics gaps, boosting gender-smart financing, and fostering innovative partnerships.

1.2 OVERVIEW OF PROGRESS, GAPS, CHALLENGES AND TRENDS IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

1.2.1 The state of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in Asia and the Pacific

In the 30 years since the adoption of the BPfA, the Asia-Pacific region has progressed towards achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Several countries have eradicated or substantially reduced extreme poverty and expanded access to social protection and affordable health care, as well as other public services which benefit all, including women and girls. The region has made commendable strides in closing gender gaps in education across primary, lower-secondary and upper-secondary levels. Some countries stand out for the work they have undertaken to prevent, respond to and eliminate gender-based violence and harmful practices. In all subregions, there has been a notable increase in women's representation in legislatures and parliaments. The active involvement and leadership of women and girls in environmental and climate action has driven transformative change towards the green and blue economies.[13 , 14]

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13 A green economy aims at reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities, while promoting sustainable development without degrading the environment. It is an alternative to the dominant economic model and focuses on improved human well-being, social equity, and reduced carbon emissions, pollution, and loss of biodiversity. See UNEP webpage: About green economy. Available at: https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/green-economy/about-green-economy (accessed on 19 July 2024).

14 The blue economy is used to describe the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and jobs, while preserving the health of marine and coastal ecosystem. See World Bank webpage: What is the Blue Economy? Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/infographic/2017/06/06/blue-economy (accessed on 19 July 2024).

Nonetheless, women and girls in the region continue to encounter numerous challenges and experience marginalization. Gender poverty gaps persist, and effective social protection coverage remains low and inadequate for most and particularly for women and girls. Limited progress has been made towards expanding the coverage of sexual and reproductive health services since 2015 and the region is not on track to meet SDG target 3.1 focused on reducing maternal mortality rates. In the past three decades, the gender gap in labour force participation has widened substantially in Asia and the Pacific. The consistent decline in labour force participation rates for both women and men are a result of reduced poverty, young people staying in education for longer and population ageing. However, the widening gender gap in labour force participation demonstrates women's particular vulnerabilities in the labour market due to reproductive and unpaid care responsibilities, perpetuated by persistent, biased gender social norms.

More young women and men in the region are not in employment, education or training (NEET). Women are benefitting less from the structural transformation of the region's economies from agriculture to manufacturing and services.[15] When employed, women are often confined to precarious, informal, low-skilled and labour-intensive work under unfavourable conditions. Moreover, women and girls face significant exclusion from science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) educational opportunities and careers. Rooted in gender inequality, the prevalence of violence and harmful practices against women and girls is alarmingly high in the region. Women's representation across all three branches of government still falls short of achieving gender parity, while their engagement in the peace and security agenda and in the increasingly pressing climate action is also largely constrained. The gender-differentiated impacts of climate change, disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbate the vulnerability of women and girls.

National review reports from 37 Asia-Pacific countries and survey responses from 40 Asia-Pacific countries on the Beijing+30 review[16] reflect a combination of achievements and challenges. Some of the achievements highlighted in national reports over the past five years include advancing women's economic empowerment by supporting women entrepreneurs; supporting woman in employment through expanding parental leave and promoting flexible work arrangements; providing accessible childcare services; addressing gender-based violence through national action plans, legislative measures and support services; increasing women's political participation and leadership through the implementation of temporary special measures; and strengthening gender mainstreaming across government sectors, including through gender-responsive budgeting. In terms of challenges, 95 per cent of Governments that responded to the survey reported that the COVID-19 pandemic adversely impacted the implementation of the BPfA. The climate crisis was also reported to have affected the implementation of the BPfA by 60 per cent of Governments. Gaps in gender equality and social inclusion highlighted by reporting Governments include prevalence of gender-based violence, economic exclusion, gender pay gaps, limited access to reproductive health rights and services, low representation in leadership and STEM fields, and limited social protection. National review reports noted challenges relating to the limited mainstreaming of gender into policies and legislation, poor coordination among government ministries, weak implementation of programmes in rural areas, the lack of gender-disaggregated data, limited resources and capacities, and harmful cultural norms and practices.

The progress has been uneven across subregions.[17] **South and South-West Asia** stands out as the subregion that requires tremendous investment and support to accelerate progress across thematic areas. This is necessary to address gender poverty gaps and labour force participation, social health protection coverage, access to quality sexual and reproductive health services, public expenditure on education and foundational learning outcomes, large gender gaps in labour force participation and youth NEET rates, child marriage, women's representation in national parliaments, gaps in legal protection of women and girls, and women and girls' access to safe drinking water and clean fuels. **South-East Asia** faces particular challenges in relation to pension coverage for older women, stagnant maternal mortality rates, adolescent fertility rates, women and girls' access to safe drinking water, and women's representation in environmental sectors such as the water resources management. **The Pacific** faces

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15 ILO (2022). Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2022: Rethinking sectoral strategies for a human-centred future of work. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_862410.pdf; and ILO and ADB (2023). Where women work in Asia and the Pacific. Available at: https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/916051/where-women-work-asia-pacific.pdf.

16 Only survey responses submitted by 18 July 2024 and national reports submitted by 23 August 2024 were analyzed. See Annex 1 for a list of countries that responded to the survey and/or submitted a national report.

17 Data and statistics used for analysis of progress and gaps across chapters 2 to 7 may follow different regional and subregional groupings (see Annex 2). In this paragraph, ESCAP subregional division is used, by their general convergence with other regional/subregional groupings, for the sake of depicting general subregional gaps.

particular challenges such as high prevalence of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence, human trafficking, high levels of maternal mortality, insufficient access to family planning means, low public expenditure on education, low representation of women in parliaments, and low access to clean fuels. **East and North-East Asia**, despite positive progress in many areas, continues to underperform in effective coverage of child benefits, improving legal protection of women and girls, combatting human trafficking, and increasing public expenditure on education, especially in addressing the negative implication of the COVID-19 pandemic. **North and Central Asia** is challenged by a high prevalence of human trafficking while the analysis of progress and gaps in many areas in this subregion is constrained by limited data.

It is nonetheless important to note that some subregions where certain gaps remain the widest have made significant progress. For instance, South and South-West Asia has contributed the world's biggest decline in child marriage since 1997, even though it remains the subregion with the highest prevalence rate in the region. It is important to understand what factors have underpinned positive change, in order to overcome the remaining challenges and to accelerate progress across the whole region.

Differences are also found among different groups of women and girls. Women and girls are not a homogenous group. The BPfA recognizes that: "Many women face additional barriers to the enjoyment of their human rights because of such factors as their race, language, ethnicity, culture, religion, disability or socioeconomic class or because they are indigenous people, migrants, including women migrant workers, displaced women or refugees." This remains true for women and girls in Asia and the Pacific today. For instance, women of working age who have young children are more likely to experience poverty. Adolescent girls and older women tend to face more stigma, stereotypes and gaps in accessing sexual and reproductive health services. Women with disabilities tend to experience higher levels of multidimensional poverty, less access to social protection benefits and lower labour force participation. Both women with disabilities and indigenous women are even less represented in politics. Women migrant workers are more likely to be denied maternity protection among other social protection benefits. Accounting for intersectional forms of discrimination and the distinct realities of different groups of women and girls, and where possible those of persons of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, is another cross-cutting approach in the analysis across chapters under Part II.

1.2.2 Structural barriers for women and girls in Asia and the Pacific

Given the intricate linkages between critical areas of concern, the achievements made in some areas are at risk of being offset by stagnation and even regression in others. To ensure that the investments that are being made can be translated into positive outcomes for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, **the region must employ a holistic approach to tackle structural barriers** – systemic, institutional and/or political barriers – that underlie the individual realities of over two billion women and girls across Asia and the Pacific. For example, women in the region make a disproportionate contribution to unpaid care work. The time they dedicate to this unremunerated work prevents them from equal participation in the labour market. Even when women are active in the labour market, contributory social protection schemes do not cover a large portion of women because they mostly work in the informal economy. Another example concerns women's lack of ownership of property and assets. This restricts their access to credit which often requires collateral. Therefore, any effort to ensure the economic empowerment of women in the region would not be successful, unless the barriers concerning their unpaid care and domestic work burden and their access to land, property and assets are recognized and systematically addressed through appropriate policies.

Legislative frameworks provide a crucial foundation for addressing structural barriers but remain largely inadequate in the Asia-Pacific region. Legal frameworks that promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex (SDG 5.1.1) exist in only 26 out of 58 ESCAP members and associate members geographically located in the region. Laws and regulations that guarantee full and equal access to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education (SDG 5.6.2) exist in only 29 countries. Only 11 countries have legal frameworks that guarantee women's equal rights to land ownership and/or control (SDG 5.a.2).[18] More countries and territories – more than half of ESCAP members and associate members geographically located in the region — provide legislative support to women's agency and freedom of movement, equal rights in marriage and divorce or parenthood. But few countries have put in place laws that address gender-based violence and harmful practices such as child marriage, employment, equal pay for work of equal value, access to credit or corporate leadership.[19] Laws that explicitly protect the rights of women and girls with an intersectional and inclusive lens are even rarer. For example, the specific rights of women with disabilities are explicitly recognized in non-discrimination or gender equality laws in only six Asia-Pacific countries,

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18   ESCAP Data Explorer. Available at: https://dataexplorer.unescap.org (accessed 3 June 2024).
19   World Bank "Women, Business and the Law 2.0 Data for 2024," Available at https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl-data (accessed on 3 June 2024).

and in 16 countries in laws on persons with disabilities. Laws that support women with disabilities to exercise their parental rights and responsibilities exist in only six countries. Laws that protect women with disabilities from sexual harassment exist in only three countries. And only in three countries in the region do laws against domestic violence stipulate accessibility of survivor services for women with disabilities.[20]

The absence of comprehensive and strong legislative support and legal protection across sectors, coupled with institutional mechanisms and procedures that do not consider the unique circumstances and needs of women and girls of diverse backgrounds, impede women and girls' access to equal opportunities, meaningful participation and leadership. The impacts of structural barriers are further amplified in the context of megatrends such as demographic shifts, digitalization and technological transformation and climate change as gaps in regulatory frameworks lead to widening of gender divides.

1.2.3 Gender social norms in Asia and the Pacific

Gender social norms refer to social beliefs in capabilities and rights in relation to gender. When gender social norms reinforce unequal gender roles, biases, prejudices and stereotypes, they reproduce and perpetuate gender inequality in access to resources and opportunities. The United Nations Development Programme's Gender Social Norms Index monitors the evolution of gender social norms based on data from the World Values Survey. The latest data indicate that **biased gender social norms are deeply ingrained among the world population including in Asia and the Pacific, regardless of their gender, with only minimal changes over the past decade.**[21]

Biased gender social norms still prevail in Asia-Pacific countries. Among the 28 ESCAP members and associate members with data on the most recent index published in 2023,[22] the share of population who hold at least one biased gender norm in relation to political, educational, economic or physical integrity dimensions[23] is nearly or above 90 per cent in 23 countries. The share is only below half of the population in two countries, Australia

and New Zealand (Figure 1.1). Both women and men hold biased gender norms, with only a small gender difference in most countries.[24] People most frequently hold biases about **physical integrity.** Within the exception of Australia, Japan and New Zealand, the majority of people in all other countries with data believe that it is justifiable for a man to beat his wife or that abortion is never justifiable. The majority of people (more than half of the population) also hold biases in the political and economic dimensions. In the **political dimension**, except in Australia, Japan, New Zealand and Singapore, more than half of the population have biases about women having the same rights as men and/or men making better political leaders than women do. In the **economic dimension**, except in Australia; Hong Kong, China; Japan; New Zealand; and Singapore, more than half of the population believe that men should have more right to a job than women, or that men make better business executives than women. Biased gender norms are less commonly observed in the **educational dimension**. With only the exception of four countries, less than half of the population in all other countries believe that university is more important for men than for women.[25]

Gender social norms have not always changed for the better across Asia and the Pacific. In the 16 countries and territories with data from the two most recent waves of data,[26] positive changes – meaning increase in the share of population holding no biased gender norm in any dimension – have been observed in nine countries. But regression has been observed in six countries, and no noticeable change has been observed in one country. The countries where the share of people holding biases has increased include high-income, upper-middle-income and lower-middle-income countries.[27] In most countries where positive changes have been observed, these changes often occur in more than one dimension. This suggests the interlinkage of the effects of gender norms in different dimensions, and hence the importance of multi-sectoral, concerted interventions to transform gender norms. More countries have shown increase in the share of people with bias in the educational dimension, as compared to other dimensions. In three countries, the share of people who are biased has increased in all four dimensions (Figure 1.2).

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20 World Bank, "Women with Disabilities", database. Available at: https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/disability (accessed on 3 June 2024).

21 UNDP, "2023 Gender Social Norm Index: Breaking down gender biases: Shifting social norms towards gender equality" (New York, 2023). Available at: https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/hdp-document/gsni202303.pdf.

22 The 2023 Gender Social Norms Index is based on wave 6 (2010-2014) and wave 7 (2017-2022) of the World Values Survey. Not all countries have data available from both waves. See "Technical note: Gender Social Norms Index", available at: https://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/publications/additional-files/2023-06/gsni_2023_technical_note.pdf.

23 See "Technical note: Gender Social Norms Index", available at: https://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/publications/additional-files/2023-06/gsni_2023_technical_note.pdf.

24 See Annex 3, GSNI data tables: by sex.

25 See Annex 3, GSNI data tables: by country and by dimension.

26 The two most recent waves of data used in the 2023 Gender Social Norms Index include wave 6 (2010-2014) and wave 7 (2017-2022) of the World Values Survey.

27 See Annex 3, GSNI data tables: change in biased gender norms. No low-income country from the Asia-Pacific region is covered in the index.

FIGURE 1.1   Share of population with at least one biased gender norm by ESCAP member or associate member (latest available period) (%)
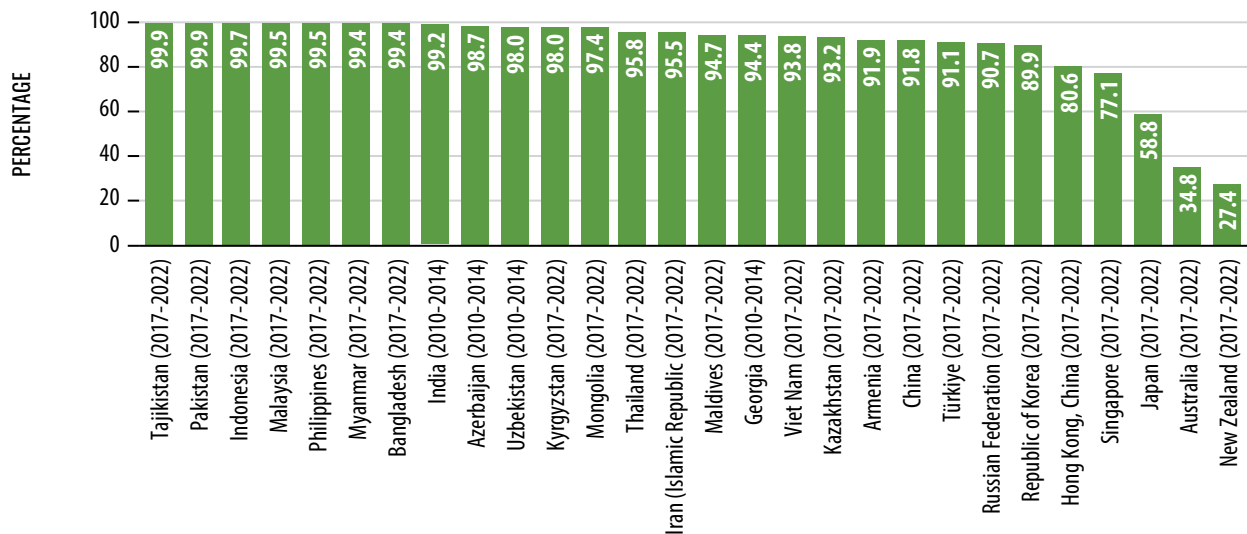
Source: ESCAP elaboration based on UNDP (2023). 2023 Gender Social Norm Index: Breaking down gender biases. UNDP, New York. Based on data from 28 ESCAP member or associate members extracted from GSNI Tables, available at: https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fhdr.undp.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fpublications%2Fadditional-files%2F2023-06%2FGSNI2023_AnnexTables2.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK. Data originate from wave 6 (2010-2014) or wave 7 (2017-2022) of the World Values Survey depending on the latest available year of data.

FIGURE 1.2   Change in the share of people with no bias ESCAP members and associate members and by dimension (2010–2014 versus 2017–2022, in percentage points)
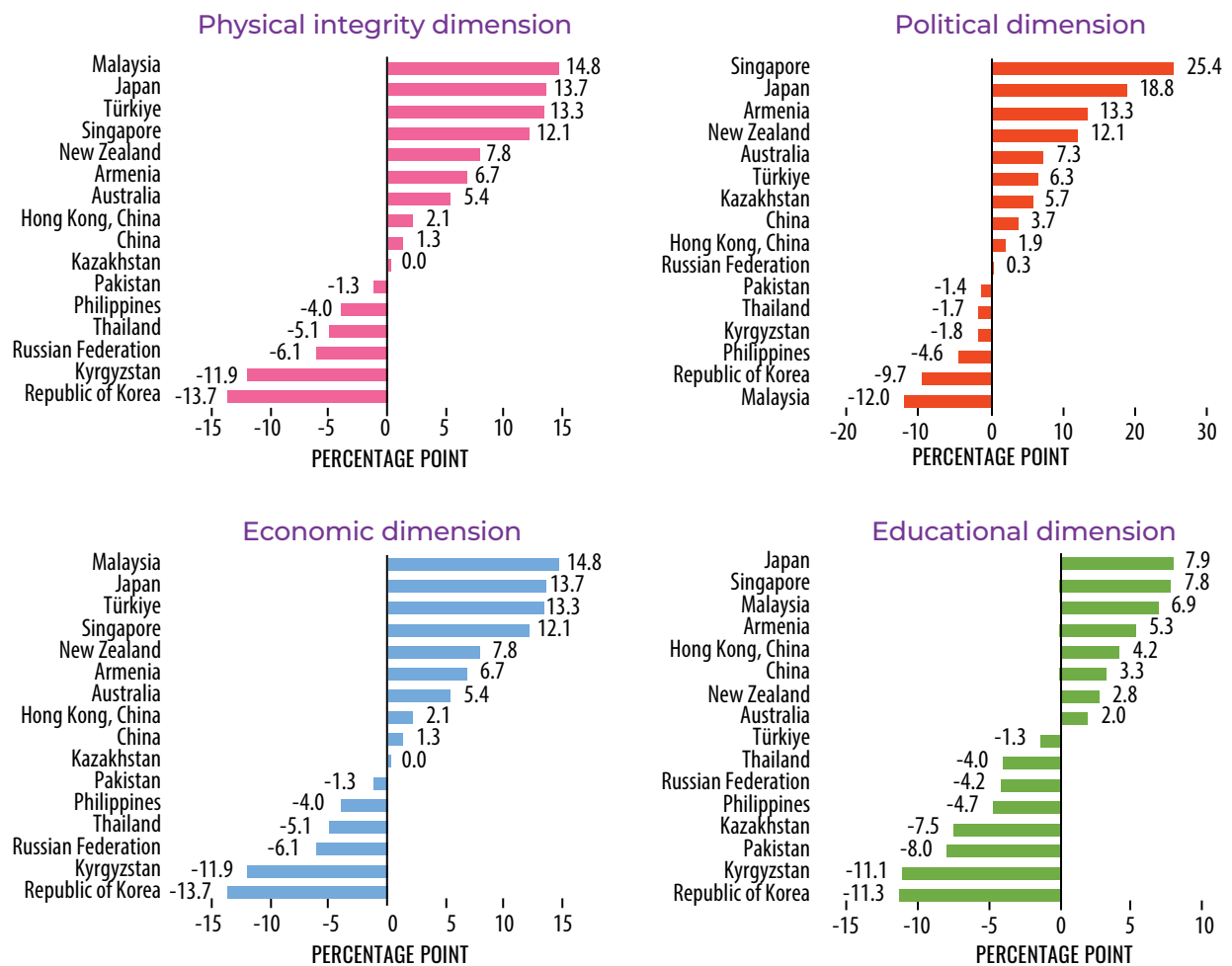
Source: ESCAP elaboration based on UNDP (2023). 2023 Gender Social Norm Index: Breaking down gender biases. UNDP, New York. Based on data of 16 Asia-Pacific countries and territories extracted from GSNI Tables, available at: https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fhdr.undp.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fpublications%2Fadditional-files%2F2023-06%2FGSNI2023_AnnexTables2.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK. Data originate from wave 6 (2010-2014) and wave 7 (2017-2022) of the World Values Survey.

Part II of the report considers the ways in which gender social norms affect progress in each of the six thematic areas, acknowledging that addressing gender social norms should be part of the essential actions to accelerate progress in all areas. Overall strategies and approaches to address harmful gender social norms are discussed under Part III.

1.2.4 Megatrends shaping gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in Asia and the Pacific

The world, including the Asia-Pacific region, is at a critical juncture in the face of critical transitions related to three inter-connected megatrends, namely climate change, demographic shifts and digitalization.[28] While these megatrends have the potential to worsen inequalities, they also present manifold opportunities to initiate and accelerate gender-transformative progress.

Climate and environmental crises

The consequences of climate change and environmental degradation, ranging from food insecurity to health impacts, loss of livelihood and forced displacement, are severe and unevenly distributed, with those least responsible for the current deterioration often bearing the greatest burden. Women have higher rates of livelihood and job loss, in part because women are overrepresented in sectors that are particularly impacted by climate change.[29] For example, in regions such as South Asia where the agriculture sector is dominated by women, more women are likely to be pushed into poverty due to climate-related pressures. Existing gender-based discrimination has constrained the capacity of women and girls to adapt to, and recover from, climate-related shocks and long-term environmental changes. In a worst-case climate path scenario, where average temperature will rise by 3–4°C by 2100, approximately 160 million more women and girls worldwide, including 29 million in Central and Southern Asia, 7 million in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia and 0.6 million in Oceania, will be pushed into extreme poverty as a direct result of climate change by 2050.[30] Furthermore, disaster risk exposures are fundamentally different among men and women, due to differences in their social roles and responsibilities, living environment, communication channels and perceptions of risks, among many other factors.[31]

Climate change, environmental degradation and disasters also exacerbate gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence, trafficking, exploitation and child marriage, due to increased poverty and economic insecurity among women and girls, displacement, and the breakdown of essential services and justice systems. Moreover, climate stressors such as droughts and floods heighten the risk of conflict as competition for scarce resources intensifies and some join armed groups to secure income after losing their livelihoods.[32] These stressors lead to climate change-induced displacements, including among Indigenous Peoples, leading to substandard living conditions and a heightened risk of gender-based and other forms of violence.[33]

As the world adapts to climate change, implementing a gender-responsive just transition[34] provides an opportunity to develop new systems that promote gender equality and foster the empowerment of women and girls. Natural resource management policies must evolve to safeguard natural environments and the habitants from the impacts of climate change, such as increased droughts and wildfires, and facilitate the shift to sustainable energy. Given their frontline roles in responding to climate-related disasters, their primary responsibility for gathering water and fuel, and their active participation in the agricultural sector, women and girls possess invaluable insights and contributions that must be incorporated into policy discussions and actions in response to climate change. As climate-induced security risks (e.g., social unrest and forced displacement) emerge as a new peace and security issue, women and girls could play an instrumental role in relevant conflict prevention and resolution as peace agents, contributing their climate and environmental knowledge and experiences.

Successfully integrating women and girls into a just transition and providing them with training for green jobs and business has the potential to enhance women's economic empowerment and narrow the gender income gap. Investing in women as green entrepreneurs and leveraging their unique knowledge of climate change impacts could lead to innovative and sustainable solutions.

Moreover, social protection schemes must be redesigned to effectively mitigate shocks and address the repercussions of climate change, such

28   These megatrends are identified by the Report of the UN Economist Network for the UN 75th Anniversary: Shaping the Trends of Our Time (September 2020). The report focuses on these three megatrends as they have broad impacts across the BPfA critical areas of concern.

29   ESCAP, Policy brief: *Gender Equality and Climate Change* (2022). Available at: https://www.unescap.org/kp/2022/gender-equality-and-climate-change.

30   UN-Women, "Data-driven insights: The effects of climate change on gender and development", brief (New York, 2023).

31   Fothergill, A. (1998). The neglect of gender in disaster work: An overview of the literature. The gendered terrain of disaster: Through women's eyes, 11-25.

32   United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, *Weathering Two Storms DPPR Practice Note Gender and Climate in Peace and Security* (2022).

33   ESCAP/APPC (7)/3.

34   The concept of "just transition" may be defined differently by different organizations and in different countries. Generally, it refers to strategies, policies or measures to ensure no one is left behind or pushed behind in the transition to low-carbon and environmentally sustainable economies and societies. See UN DESA, "A just green transition: concepts and practice so far", Policy Brief No.14, November 2022. Available at: https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/publication/PB_141.pdf (accessed on 23 July 2024).

as food insecurity, loss of livelihood, adverse health consequences, displacement and the increased risk of gender-based violence. Simultaneously, social protection systems can be restructured to improve non-contributory schemes and cater to gender-differentiated needs. It is imperative that these schemes respond to the impacts of climate change and disasters on women and girls, which are compounded by their disproportionately high unpaid care and domestic work responsibilities, as well as their higher representation in the informal economy.

Demographic shifts

The Asia-Pacific region is ageing rapidly, with projections indicating that by 2050, one in four people will be 60 years or above, reaching 1.3 billion people, while the share stood at 18 per cent in 2023.[35] East and North-East Asia is ageing the fastest while the population ageing trend is common to all subregions.[36] Women currently make up 54 per cent of the region's older persons — a higher share over men that can be largely ascribed to women's longer life expectancy.[37] **Gender-based discrimination and disadvantages that women face span throughout the life cycle are often compounded as they age.** Throughout their lives, they encounter unequal access to social protection and health care, gender bias and discrimination in education and career options, as well as lower labour force participation, reduced income and less land ownership compared to men. This increases their vulnerability to poverty and income insecurity while compromising their resilience to shocks throughout the life cycle, particularly in old age and once widowed. Moreover, they are more often affected by health problems in old age than men, due to a lack of access to health care and social health protection. Recent World Health Organization (WHO) studies found that older women, along with women with disabilities, are vulnerable to violence, and they are too often underrepresented in prevalence measurement and relevant studies. While intimate partner violence and sexual violence may continue in old age, older women and women with disabilities are vulnerable to abuses and violence perpetrated by caregivers and family members. They face specific barriers to seeking assistance and services due to their often-isolated living status.[38]

The gendered poverty persists into old age, partially as a consequence of women spending a disproportionate amount of time on unpaid care and domestic work, a pattern that starts when they are still children. Women, including older women, fulfil most unpaid and paid caregiver roles for young children and older persons, sometimes caring for grandchildren and older family members at the same time.[39] As unpaid caregivers, they typically manage multiple responsibilities, including attending to dependent children, older family members or persons with disabilities; overseeing household tasks; and sometimes engaging in income-generating activities. Overburdened caregivers may compromise the quality of care they provide and/or be forced to give up income-generating activities or further education opportunities. This in turn reduces their income and access to contributory social protection benefits, thereby leading to a persistent risk of poverty for caregivers. Consequently, many women lack income security and the ability to afford the care they need in old age. Paid care services represent an important source of care provision, with a rising demand for them as the population ages. As women remain the majority of paid care workers, the increasing demand for care services presents an opportunity for women's economic empowerment. However, most care workers in the region do not have access to decent work, and women care workers on average earn less than men in similar roles. The job creation brought about by population ageing would not benefit women unless decent work is prioritized in the care sector.

An increasingly large share of older persons among the region's population increases the demand for accessible and inclusive public infrastructure and facilities — both physical and digital — services and information. Such demand creates opportunities to improve and transform infrastructure and public services in the region and support growth and jobs, benefiting the broader population beyond older persons. Intersectional perspectives, that should help address gender, age and disability concerns in the design of public infrastructure and facilities, are lacking. This contributes to the continuing low level of accessibility and inclusiveness. Biases and discrimination on the basis of gender, age and disability further reinforce access barriers. This is particularly the case in older women's and women with disabilities' access to sexual and reproductive health services.[40] The inclusion of older women and women with disabilities in decision-making is important to ensure their voices are heard and their inputs are valued and incorporated. Such inclusion facilitates critical adaptations in the development

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35   United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) (2023). *"Asia-Pacific Population and Development Report"* ESCAP, Bangkok.

36   ESCAP, "Population Datasheet", available at: https://www.unescap.org/kp/2023/escap-population-data-sheet-2023 (accessed on 05 May 2024).

37   ESCAP, *Asia-Pacific Report on Population Ageing 2022: Trends, policies and good practices regarding older persons and population ageing* (ST/ESCAP/3041).

38   WHO, "WHO calls for greater attention to violence against women with disabilities and older women", news, 27 March 2024. Available at: https://www.who.int/news/item/27-03-2024-who-calls-for-greater-attention-to-violence-against-women-with-disabilities-and-older-women (accessed on 08 July 2024).

39   ESCAP, "Older Women and Men as Providers and Recipients of Unpaid Care Work in the Asia-Pacific Region", report (Bangkok, 2020).

40   ESCAP, *Disability at A Glance 2019: Investing in accessibility in Asia and the Pacific* (Bangkok, 2019).

of accessible and inclusive physical and digital infrastructure, as well as public services in the context of population ageing.

Shifting the perception of population ageing to recognize the positive influence it can have on economic and social development is necessary to challenge ageist stereotypes and biases. An example of potential positive impact is the so-called "demographic metabolism" process, experienced by several countries in the region. As part of this process, while the population ages, a rise in educational attainment is observed, along with improved health and, in certain cases, increased wealth. Additionally, the persistent prevalence of large cohorts of youth in different countries opens a window of opportunity for bridging the generational gap, thereby fostering harmonious co-existence and promoting equitable and sustainable societies in the future.[41]

Although the Asia-Pacific region is ageing rapidly, in South-East Asia and South and South-West Asia, the number of youth (aged 15–24) still outnumbers the older adult population (aged 60 and older). It is important that in shifting resources and policies to focus on population ageing, the needs of youth, including young women and girls, continue to be met and their perspectives heeded.[42]

Digital and technological transformation

Digital and technological transformation presents new economic, educational and social opportunities, particularly for those most marginalized, by providing digital and technological solutions. For instance, digital technologies help people to continue learning and access various services during pandemics; enable persons with disabilities to learn and work by reducing physical barriers and providing innovative solutions to ensure accessibility needs are met; and allow people to receive early warnings, essential information and social protection benefits at times of public health crises and disasters. Generative artificial intelligence (AI)[43] has opened up vast opportunities ranging from enhanced work productivity and learning efficiency to new forms of jobs.

However, digital and technological transformation could also deepen existing inequalities. An underlying factor that requires change is the digital

divide based on gender, age, disability and other identities that make some population groups more vulnerable to the risks and less likely to benefit from the opportunities presented by this megatrend. Available data indicate that the percentage of women using the internet stands at 63 per cent compared to 69 per cent of men in Asia and the Pacific.[44] The gender gap in mobile ownership is 2 per cent in East Asia and the Pacific and 15 per cent in South Asia.[45] Globally, cross-national skills assessments suggest that women are 25 per cent less likely than men to possess the knowledge of using technology for basic activities, such as creating simple formulas in spreadsheets.[46] This divide stems from entrenched gender biases and discriminatory social norms, which prioritize resources for men's access to technology, such as smartphones and data.

Gender biases and discrimination against women and girls are often perpetuated in the algorithm and the design of digital products and technologies. Due to gender inequalities in the labour market, women are often overrepresented in job sectors and functions that are more likely to be replaced by computerization,[47] automation and Generative AI technologies. Furthermore, various forms of offline gender-based violence are replicated or exacerbated in digital spaces, severely impacting the health, well-being and safety of women and girls. The gender digital divide and violence in digital spaces further hinder women's public participation and leadership, exacerbating socioeconomic and political gender disparities.

Gender-based segregation in education and occupation contributes to widening the digital divide, if not mitigated. Education systems perpetuate stereotypes, discouraging girls from pursuing science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects which are not only crucial to the information and communications technology (ICT) sector but also essential for developing innovative solutions for transforming the economy and addressing climate change. Even if women and girls do obtain skills and degrees in STEM fields, the persistent gender-based occupational segregation continues to prevent them from obtaining and excelling in STEM-related jobs. As a result, women are underrepresented in high-value STEM-related sectors and job functions (except for some roles in health care), reinforcing the gender pay

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41   ESCAP, *Asia-Pacific Population and Development Report 2023* (Bangkok, 2023).

42   Ibid.

43   Artificial intelligence (AI) is an umbrella term for a wide range of methods and tools, including machine learning, facial recognition, and natural language processing.

44   ITU, *Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2023* (Geneva, 2023).

45   The gender gap refers to how much less likely a woman is to own a mobile phone than a man. It is calculated using the following formula: (male owners as a percentage of male population female owners as a percentage of female population) / male owners as a percentage of male population. GSMA, *The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023* (London, 2023).

46   UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, *Girls' Digital Literacy in the East Asia and Pacific Region: Spotlight on Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR Timor-Leste and Viet Nam* (Bangkok, 2023).

47   UNIDO, *Industrial Development Report 2020: Industrializing in the Digital Age* (Vienna, 2019).

Women engineers in Türkiye. © UNDP Europe and Central Asia

gap and leading to innovations that fail to address gender-differentiated needs. The significant gender digital divide hampers the region's ability to leverage the untapped talent of women and girls.

However, if digital and technological transformation is leveraged to address existing inequalities, substantial progress towards gender equality could be achieved. Girls in Asia and the Pacific have shown remarkable educational achievements in recent years, often outperforming boys when they are in school. Ensuring that all girls complete primary and secondary education, providing women and girls with quality STEM education and digital skills, especially at the higher education level, and facilitating the transition from school to STEM careers for women could increase their involvement in technological development. This would help ensure technologies are designed to meet women's needs and transform the male-dominated leadership and decision-making patterns in high-value sectors.

Policies addressing the computerization and automation of jobs offer an opportunity to re-train women in the digital skills and technological innovations they may have previously missed out on in formal schooling and skills training, as well as informal learning opportunities. Digital labour platforms, when promoting decent work practices, also offer new opportunities for women who require flexible working locations and hours to join the labour force.[48] Digitalization creates new opportunities for women owners of micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) to expand their businesses. Additionally, digital technologies have increasingly been used in the booming green economy. When women are provided with the necessary skills, there are opportunities for them to more proactively participate in the green economy.

Part II of the report will examine the implications of these megatrends on women and girls and explore their potential as opportunities for advancing gender equality in the various dimensions and issue areas to be discussed.

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48   ESCAP, "Leveraging Digital Innovation for Inclusive and Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific", technical paper (Bangkok, 2023).

PART II

THE PURSUIT OF GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

CHAPTER 2

Poverty reduction and human capital development

A woman carries her bag at Koyambedu market in Chennai, India. © Unsplash/Prashanth Pinha

KEY MESSAGES

Poverty is multidimensional, it encompasses deprivations related to income security, nutrition, health, education, access to resources and other services that are essential for a basic standard of living[1] and human capital development. Poverty is feminized and addressing it requires intentional investment to close gender and equity gaps in human capital through gender-responsive, inclusive public services and tackling the underlying gender norms.

Poverty reduction

The Asia-Pacific region has witnessed a remarkable decrease in poverty over the past three decades, with several countries eliminating extreme poverty. However, 47 million people have been pushed back into extreme poverty due to the COVID-19 pandemic and many more are at risk due to climate change. Women and girls are disproportionately affected:

- Gender poverty gaps to the disadvantage of women and girls start in the early childhood, continue into adolescence and during their prime reproductive and economically productive years (from 20 to 34 years old). They resurface in women's old age.

- The gender poverty gaps are most pronounced in **Central and Southern Asia**. Where these gaps are most extreme, women and girls are more likely to live in poverty than men and boys by over 2 percentage points or more than 20 per cent.[2]

- The gender poverty gaps are expected to widen as poverty resurges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for women aged 25 to 34 in South Asia where they are forecast to be 129 poor women for every 100 poor men by 2030.[3]

- Half of the world's multidimensional poor live in Asia and the Pacific. This represents 495 million women and men, among whom 389 million live in South Asia (2021).[4]

- Women with disabilities were more likely to live in multidimensional poverty than women without disabilities, men with disabilities and men without disabilities.[5]

- Persisting gender gaps in nutrition, health, education as well as access to other resources and facilities for meeting basic needs put women and girls, particularly those facing intersectional discrimination, at higher risks of multidimensional poverty. This includes women and girls with disabilities, rural women and women migrants in urban areas.

1   A basic standard of living allows individuals and families to be able to afford basic needs such as food, housing, healthcare, education, transport and clothing.
2   ESCAP compilation based on Annex A in Munoz Boudet and others, "A Global View of Poverty, Gender, and Household Composition", policy Research working paper, No. WPS 9553, World Bank Group (Washington, D.C., 2021).
3   UN Women (UN-Women), *From Insight to Action: Gender Equality in the Wake of COVID-19* (New York, 2020).
4   UNDP, "Making Our Future: New Directions for Human Development in Asia and the Pacific", 2024 regional human development report (New York, 2023).
5   ESCAP elaboration based on Disability Data Initiative, "Results tables, Multidimensional analysis", web page. Available at: https://disabilitydata.ace.fordham.edu/result-tables/ (accessed on 21 May 2024).

Social protection

Social protection is underinvested in most Asia-Pacific countries and access to contributory schemes is particularly low, resulting in inadequate benefit levels, for both women and men. **Women are disadvantaged, in particular, in contributory schemes. Their contributory capacity is often limited due to discrimination in the labour market associated with their disproportionate unpaid care burden.**

- In Asia and the Pacific, only one in four children aged 0 to 15 is covered by **child benefits**, significantly lower than the global average (28.2 per cent). Coverage is even lower for children aged 0 to 18 years (19.3 per cent). Social protection coverage and expenditure for children are particularly low in **East and North-East Asia** and **South and South-West Asia**.[6] The absence of universal child benefits heightens the risks of poverty, early marriage and school dropout, particularly for adolescent girls, and increases women's and girls' unpaid care burden.

- Less than 40 per cent of mothers with newborns receive **maternity cash benefits**.[7] In only 24 countries, the statutory paid maternity leave meets the international established standard of minimum 14 weeks.[8]

- Less than one in three women of working age is covered by **old-age pension schemes,** compared to 44 per cent of men.[9] When covered, women have access to a lower level of pension benefits due to limited contributory capacity and their concentration in the informal economy which disqualifies them for contributory schemes in many countries. This leads to higher risk of income insecurity for women in old age.

- More than one-third of the region's population is not covered by any **social health protection schemes**, with particularly concerning low coverage in **Southern Asia**.[10] In many countries, sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services are not included in the essential service package that is covered by social health protection benefits, posing particular challenges for adolescent girls and older women.

Sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights

Access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services and reproductive rights is central to universal health coverage (UHC). **While UHC has not been achieved in the majority of Asia-Pacific countries, coverage of SRH services is even lower with little progress made since 2015.** SRH service interruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed or even worsened reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health (RMNCH) outcomes in **South-East Asia.**

SRH services included in the UHC package are often limited to maternal health and, to a lesser extent, family planning. The capacity to provide quality services accessible to all is limited in most countries. Adolescent girls, women and girls in the poorest households, with no education and living in rural areas are left starkly behind. Key components of SRH services are set out below.

- **Maternal mortality** in the region has declined by one-third since 2000, with most reductions achieved before 2015. However, many countries, mostly in **South-East Asia, South and South-West Asia and the Pacific**, still experienced relatively high maternal mortality ratios in 2020.[11] The region is unlikely to achieve the SDG 3.1 by 2030, unless progress is accelerated. The region has made substantial progress in reducing **neonatal mortality.** All subregions **but South and South-West Asia** have achieved or are close to achieving SDG 3.2.

- The progress in reducing maternal and perinatal mortality is ascribed to better access to quality maternal care services such as skilled birth attendance. In the Asia-Pacific region, **skilled birth attendance** was nearly universal **except for South and South-West Asia**, where it was estimated at 89.4 per cent in 2021.[12] Yet, **inequalities in access to quality maternal and newborn health care services disproportionately affect adolescent and young mothers, mothers and newborns in rural and ethnic minority communities as well as those in vulnerable situations due to stigmatization, lack of awareness and other barriers such as financial constraint.**

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6   ESCAP elaboration based on ILO estimates, 2024; World Social Protection Database, based on the Social Security Inquiry; ISSA Social Security Programs Throughout the World; ILOSTAT; national sources. Regional and subregional aggregates are weighted by population.

7   Ibid.

8   ESCAP, *Protecting our Future Today: Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific. Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2024).

9   Ibid.

10   ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Regional Companion Report for Asia and the Pacific* (Geneva, 2021).

11   ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicators by SDG: 3.1.1 – Reduce maternal mortality", database. Available at https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 10 March 2024).

12   ESCAP, "Gender equality and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights in Asia and the Pacific", ESCAP/APPC(7)/INF/3 (Bangkok, 2023).

+ Despite significant progress towards meeting **family planning needs** since 2000, **progress across subregions is uneven and gaps exist, especially where women's and girls' use of modern contraceptive methods are concerned.** About 16 per cent of married women in Asia and 19 per cent in Oceania had unmet need for modern methods in 2023.[13] **Young women and adolescent girls** are more likely to have unmet family planning needs with modern methods, resulting in high risks of unintended pregnancy and unsafe abortion, particularly affecting adolescent and young girls in subregions where early marriage remains high.

+ **Adolescent fertility** on average is lower in Asia and the Pacific as compared to the world average and has steadily declined since 2000. Yet it continues to affect many adolescent girls, especially in **South-East Asia** (35.2 live births per 1,000 women aged 15 to 19).[14] Adolescent fertility rates are higher in rural than in urban areas, and higher among girls with no education than those with more than secondary education. Progress in reducing adolescent fertility has stagnated since 2015.

+ One in five cervical cancer cases and one in four cervical cancer deaths in 2022 worldwide occurred in **South Asia.**[15]

+ Adolescent girls in **South Asia** face particular barriers to access **HPV vaccination**, increasing their risks to cervical cancers, due to insufficient incorporation of HPV vaccination in national immunization and unavailability of vaccines as well as stigma, myth and misconception, lack of health literacy and girls' agency to make decisions about their own body and health.

+ In the Asia-Pacific region, the **HIV** epidemic disproportionately affects key populations, especially young people (aged 15–24 years) and their sexual partners. This age bracket accounted for about a quarter of the region's new HIV infections in 2022.[16] Significant gaps remain in prevention services and treatment coverage. Stigma and discrimination against persons living with HIV and persons from key populations continue to be the main barriers that prevent access to and the uptake of testing and treatment.

Quality education and skills development

Major progress in education attainment has been achieved for both women and men in Asia and the Pacific; but inequalities remain in the mean years of schooling across countries.

Gender matters in education attainment while the dynamic varies across countries, age groups and levels of education.

+ When enrolled in school, girls are more likely than boys to complete education across primary and secondary levels in all Asia-Pacific countries, with few exceptions.[17]

+ Poor women aged 20 to 35 years are the furthest left behind in secondary education completion in 15 out of 30 countries analysed while poor men are the furthest left behind in nine countries. The disadvantage of poor women aged 35 and older increases significantly, being the furthest left behind group in 21 countries.[18]

+ Children's disadvantage in access to early childhood education is found to be associated with no or low education of mothers in 13 out of 26 countries.[19]

+ Participation of women and girls in tertiary **STEM education** is low even in high-income countries in the region.[20]

13   Ibid.
14   United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population division, *World Population Prospects 2022: Summary of Results* (United Nations publications, 2022).
15   World Health Organization (WHO), "Global Cancer Observatory", web page. Available at: https://gco.iarc.fr/en (accessed on 1 August 2024).
16   Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), *The path that ends AIDS: UNAIDS Global AIDS Update 2023* (Geneva, 2023*)*. Key populations are gay/ bisexual and other men who have sex with men, people in prisons and other closed settings, people who inject drugs, sex workers and transgender persons.
17   ESCAP calculations based on data from ESCAP SDG Gateway Asia Pacific, ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicators by SDG: 4.1.2 – Completion rate by educational level", database. Available at https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 25 March 2024).
18   ESCAP, "Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) Platform", database. Available at: https://lnob.unescap.org/overview-results?indicator=404&geo=all&year=all (accessed on 29 May 2024). See ESCAP LNOB Platform analysis based on MICS and DHS data on secondary education completion for people aged 20–35 years and for people aged 35 years and older from 30 countries.
19   ESCAP, "Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) Platform", database. Available at: https://lnob.unescap.org/overview-results?indicator=404&geo=all&year=all (accessed on 29 May 2024). See ESCAP LNOB Platform analysis based on MICS and DHS data between 2010 and 2022 on early childhood education from 26 countries.
20   OECD, *The Role of Education and Skills in Bridging the Digital Gender Divide: Evidence from APEC Economies* (Paris, 2019).

The foundational learning crisis persists, threatening to compromise children's learning outcomes in the longer term.

✚ Inadequate foundational learning is particularly prevalent in low- and middle-income countries in South Asia, where the share of children not acquiring basic proficiency in literacy by age 10 was estimated at 78 per cent in 2022.[21]

✚ Despite the importance of early childhood education in building foundational skills, enrolment in early childhood education remains under 70 per cent in most parts of the region.[22] Early childhood education is failing to challenge gender stereotypes and biases that continue to be absorbed by the youngest children.

Many girls in the region are denied schooling.

✚ This is an injustice frequently suffered by women and girls in countries affected by armed conflicts and by women and girls with disabilities.

✚ Insufficient coverage of **menstrual health services and education** in schools in most countries in the region, compounded with stigma and stress about menstruation, and threats of **school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV)**, hinder girls' school attendance and access to quality education.

The Asia-Pacific region is significantly underinvesting in education and public expenditure on education is dropping.

✚ Public education expenditure in **East Asia and the Pacific** has dropped from 15.3 per cent of the total public expenditure in 2019 to 12.8 per cent in 2020. It has not recovered the pre-pandemic level (per latest data as of 2021). In **South Asia**, the spending level has been declining since 2016 and is merely at 10.2 per cent in 2021.[23]

✚ The poorest children are benefiting the least from public spending on education.

The skills portfolio for women and girls, particularly the most vulnerable groups, needs to be transformed to enable access to formal, green and decent jobs. This transformation is essential to developing countries in Asia and the Pacific where informality and underemployment prevail in the job market. In Asia and the Pacific, many women are being left behind by digital and technological transformation.

✚ Fewer women (63 per cent) than men (69 per cent) use the internet, and wide gaps in internet usage and mobile phone ownership exist between the poorest and the wealthiest, and the less educated and the better educated.[24]

✚ Data from seven countries in Southeast Asia indicate that the gender gap is more evident when it comes to more advanced digital skills.[25]

✚ Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) systems and curricula need to be modernized to meet modern labour market demands, in the context of the green and digital economies and demographic shifts. Priority must urgently be given to training and re-skilling of women, young people, people with a lower level of education, and those more at risk of being excluded from the job market, such as older persons and persons with disabilities.

Reducing multidimensional poverty that is disproportionately experienced by women and girls requires a multifaceted strategy. This must combine targeted measures and financing to improve access to productive resources and services, social protection and healthcare. A focus on sexual and reproductive health is particularly important, as is education and skills development.

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21   World Bank and others, *The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update* (Washington, D.C, 2022).

22   United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Global Education Monitoring Report, 2023: Technology in Education: A Tool on Whose Terms?* (Paris, 2023).

23   World Bank, "World Development Indicators: Government expenditure on education, total (% of government expenditures)". Available at: https://databank. worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&series=SE.XPD.TOTL.GB.ZS&country=EAS&_gl=1*1ng1byj*_gcl_au*NzUwOTYzOTg5LjE3MjA2MjIxMzY (accessed on 21 August 2024).

24   International Telecommunication Unions, *Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2023* (Geneva, 2023).

25   United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Global Education Monitoring Report Summary 2023: Technology in education: A tool on whose terms? Southeast Asia Regional Report* (Paris, 2023).

2.1 OVERVIEW

Poverty has multifaceted impact on people's lives. It perpetuates pre-existing inequalities rooted in systematic discrimination and exclusion and impacts some population groups disproportionately. Women and girls are particularly affected, especially those facing intersecting forms of discrimination. Increasingly, poverty is understood as a multi-dimensional phenomenon that goes beyond economic deprivation and covers deprivations related to access to health, education, nutrition, basic resources and services, and standard of living. Social protection has been proven a highly effective means to reduce poverty and vulnerability. Investing in human capital through nutrition, health care, quality education, skills and jobs, which enables everyone to realize their potential as productive members of society throughout the life course, is key to ending extreme poverty and creating sustainable, inclusive development. Closing gender gaps in these areas is not only essential for the empowerment of women and girls but also for unlocking the dividends of gender equality which can accelerate development of societies and economies. This is a mission that cannot be achieved without concerted efforts to eradicate structural discrimination and pervasive gender norms and stereotypes that remain across all segments of our societies.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) calls for strategic actions focused on women and poverty (critical area of concern A), education and training of women (critical area of concern B) and women and health (critical area of concern C). These critical areas are aligned with the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, particularly SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (health and well-being), SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 5 (gender equality). With these areas and SDGs in mind, the **Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)** has adopted agreed conclusions at their recent sessions that provide guidance to shape progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. The **agreed conclusions of the sixty-eighth session in 2024** urges Governments and all stakeholders to accelerate actions that strengthen institutions, deploy financing from a gender perspective and expand fiscal space to address poverty in its broad and multidimensional terms, through comprehensive and participatory poverty eradication policies. It calls for investment in approaches that address systemic barriers and structural root causes of gender inequality. The agreed conclusions point to the importance of meeting the needs and supporting the agency of particular groups of women and girls such as older women, adolescent girls, women and girls with disabilities, Indigenous women and women migrants in relevant actions. Accounting for the implications of climate change and digitalization is also recognized as critically important.[26]

Chapter 2 reviews the implementation of these interlinked areas in a rapidly evolving Asia and the Pacific. It points to the criticality of more dynamic, integrated, gender-responsive and inclusive solutions to address multidimensional poverty and improve human capital in the region. The chapter first presents the latest evidence on the gender dimensions of poverty in Asia and the Pacific. The analysis looks into both monetary and multidimensional poverty and examines its impacts on women and girls at different life stages and in different situations. The next sections assess the status of social protection and health services, with a focus on sexual and reproductive health, as well as education and skills development for women and girls in the region. Promising actions and practices by member States in these areas are showcased.

Across this chapter, a vision to prevent people from falling back into poverty throughout their life and in the generations to come is embedded by accounting for the implications of megatrends such population ageing, climate change, digital and technological transformations on poverty and human capital development. Throughout the discussions, gender norms and bias that underline inequalities within and beyond the household is a recurring theme.

2.2 POVERTY REDUCTION

Poverty is a pronounced deprivation of wellbeing. Individuals, families and communities in poverty do not have enough resources to meet their basic needs. While poverty is often one of the key defining characteristics of inequalities, even poverty is not equal. Within the same impoverished family or community, individuals who are discriminated against due to norms related to gender, age, disability and other marginalized identities are often subject to deeper poverty. In many countries in the region, poverty is also featured by a divide between rural and urban areas associated with urbanization, labour migration and the growth of the non-agricultural sector, which is often understated by official poverty statistics.

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26   United Nations, "Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective, Report of the Secretary-General", E/CN.6/2024/L.3 (New York, 2024).

2.2.1 Monetary poverty

The Asia-Pacific region has made considerable progress in reducing poverty over the past three decades. The latest estimates indicate several countries in the region have eliminated extreme poverty, estimated by income or consumption, according to 2022 international and national poverty lines. These countries include Bhutan, China, Kazakhstan, Russian Federation, Thailand and Türkiye.[27]

Despite commendable progress, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing frequency of climate-induced disasters show that poverty reduction progress can easily be halted and reversed. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ensuing cost-of-living crisis of 2022, reversed hard-won gains. It is estimated that 47 million people in the region have been pushed into extreme poverty[28] due to multiple waves of virus resurgence, lack of global vaccination and losses of jobs and livelihoods. These consequences have affected especially women in the informal economy.[29] Millions of households live just above the poverty line. Elevated and sustained inflation, especially for food, continues to erode purchasing power. This is particularly acute among poorer and near-poor households which allocate a significant share of their budget to food expenditures.

South and South-West Asia is particularly vulnerable to monetary poverty measured at the recently revised international poverty line of $2.15 (Figure 2.1). External shocks and disaster events exacerbated by climate change continue to threaten livelihoods across the region, especially in the Pacific, South-East Asia and South and South-West Asia, and slow the pace of poverty eradication. In Pakistan, for instance, the national poverty rate increased by close to 4.0 percentage points as a direct consequence of the 2022 Monsoon Floods, which also increased the depth of poverty by pushing and estimated 7 million additional people to live more than 20 per cent below the national poverty line.[30]

The widest gender poverty gaps are the most pronounced in Central and Southern Asia.[31] The gaps start to appear in the early childhood, continue to be pronounced throughout adolescence and the prime reproductive and economically productive years (aged 20 to 34 years), and resurge in old age. The Global analysis based on the Global Monitoring Database[32] shows, in Central and Southern Asia, girls under the age of 15 are more likely to live in poor households than boys by 2 percentage points. The gender gaps are particularly pronounced between the ages of 20 and 34 (Figure 2.2). Women in these age groups are in their prime reproductive years and they shoulder a

FIGURE 2.1   Share of population in extreme and moderate poverty in Asia and the Pacific, by subregion
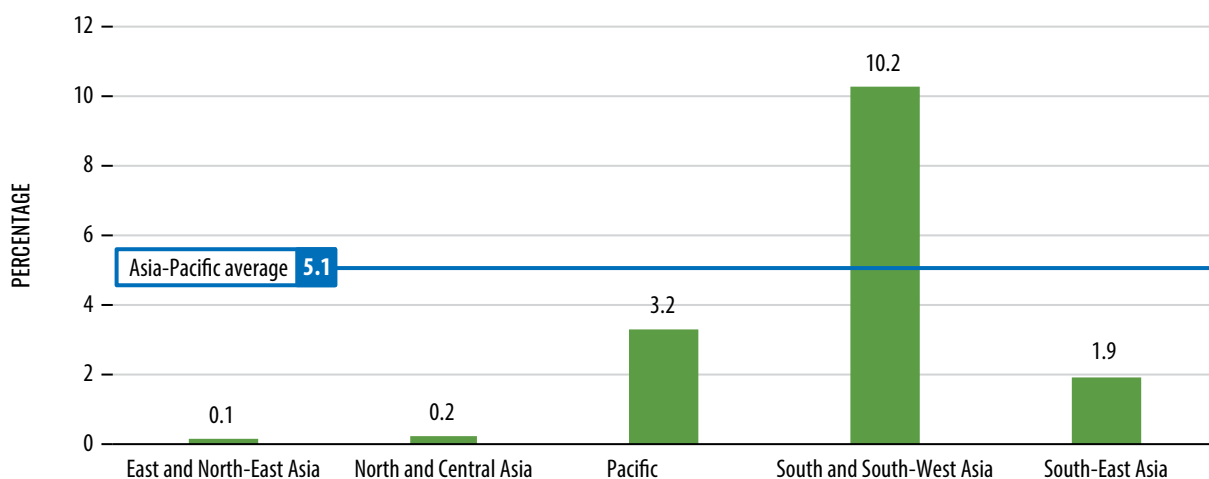
Source: ESCAP, *Protecting our Future Today: Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific. Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2024). ESCAP estimates based on World Bank Poverty and Inequality Platform accessed in May 2024. Note: Estimates follow ESCAP definitions of subregions and are based on the latest international poverty line of $2.15 a day at 2017 Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). In total 28 countries with data available during 2017-2022 are included per recommendation by the World Bank for the application of the latest international poverty line. As poverty is routinely measured at the household level, further disaggregation to assess whether some groups have been more affected than others has not been possible.

27   ESCAP, "SDG Goal Profile 1: Poverty", policy brief (Bangkok, 2024).

28   United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "*The Human Cost of Inaction: Poverty, Social Protection and Debt Servicing, 2020-2023*", UNDP Global Policy Network Brief (New York, 2023).

29   United Nations, "Review of the implementation of the agreed conclusions of the sixty-third session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Report of the Secretary-General", E/CN.6/2024/4 (New York, 2024).

30   World Bank, "Qualifying the poverty impact of the 2022 floods in Pakistan", blog, 18 May 2023. Available at: https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/developmenttalk/quantifying-poverty-impact-2022-floods-pakistan (accessed on 1 August 2024).

31   See Annex 2 for regional groupings by the United Nations Statistics Division in monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals.

32   The Global Monitoring Database (GMD) is the World Bank's repository of multitopic income and expenditure household surveys used to monitor global poverty and shared prosperity. The household survey data are typically collected by national statistical offices in each country, and then compiled, processed, and harmonized by the Data for Goals (D4G) team in the Poverty Global Practice. The cited study uses GMD data accessed in January 2019 that covers at least 87 per cent of the population in Central and Southern Asia and Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, and restricted population coverage in West Asia.

disproportionate amount of childcare. Yet these age ranges also overlap with the economically productive years. Such a gender difference among young adults is to some extent explained by the fact women tend to marry and give birth to their first children at a younger age than men. The presence of children increases the likelihood of both women and men living in poverty, but much more so for women — especially for those who are single parents — and at a younger age.[33]

Early marriage, becoming a widow, having young and elderly dependents or divorce and separation all increase the likelihood of women living in extreme poverty.[34] Restricted access to and control of land continue to undermine women's economic empowerment. Only 12 countries in the Asia-Pacific region have existing legal frameworks that guarantee women's equal rights to land ownership and/or control (SDG 5.a.2).[35] Age groups of 60–64 and of 75–79 are two other periods when the gender poverty gap is particularly acute to the disadvantage of women (Figure 2.2).[36] Other research suggests that women's poverty in the old age is due to lack of access to pensions and other income sources, combined with a higher life expectancy than men (see discussion in the next section).

FIGURE 2.2 **Gaps in poverty rates in Central and Southern Asia, by sex and age group**

(A) POVERTY RATE (%) BY GENDER AND AGE IN CENTRAL AND SOUTH ASIA

(B) GAPS IN POVERTY RATES BY SEX IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN ASIA
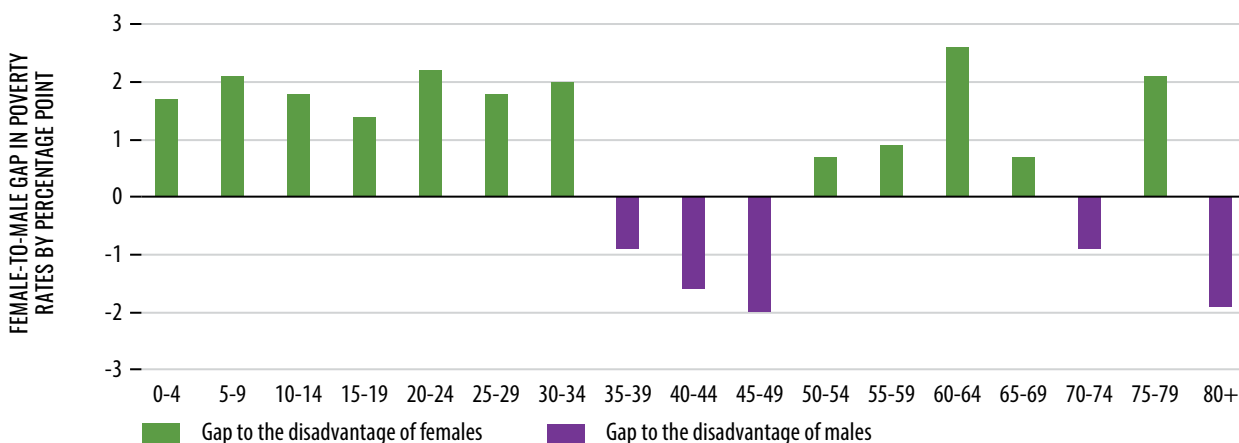
Source: ESCAP elaboration based on Annex A in Munoz Boudet and others, "A Global View of Poverty, Gender, and Household Composition", policy Research working paper, No. WPS 9553, World Bank Group (Washington, D.C., 2021). The study uses data from the Global Monitoring Database accessed in January 2019 that covers at least 87 per cent of the population in Central and Southern Asia and Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, and restricted population coverage in West Asia. Regional groupings follow the definition by the United Nations Statistics Division in monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals (see Annex 2). In panel (b), PP stands for percentage point. The gap in percentage (%) is calculated by the difference in the female and male poverty rates as proportion of the male poverty rate.

33   Munoz Boudet and others, "A Global View of Poverty, Gender, and Household Composition", policy Research working paper, No. WPS 9553, World Bank Group (Washington, D.C., 2021).

34   World Bank, "Gender differences in poverty and household composition through the life-cycle: A global perspective (English)", policy research working paper (Washington, D.C., 2018).

35   ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicators by SDG 5.a.2 – Proportion of countries where the legal framework (including customary law) guarantees women's equal rights to land ownership and/or control", database. Available at: https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 3 June 2024).

36   Munoz Boudet and others, "A Global View of Poverty, Gender, and Household Composition", policy Research working paper, No. WPS 9553, World Bank Group (Washington, D.C., 2021).

The gender poverty gaps are expected to widen due to the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating poverty. This is particularly the case for women in South Asia.[37] Forecasts conducted in 2020 suggested that the gender poverty gap in the subregion would widen from 107 poor women for every 100 poor men in 2021 to 110 women for every 100 men by 2030. The predicted increase in this gap is wider for the age group from 25 to 34 years (Figure 2.3). Before the pandemic, projections suggested that by 2030, 15.8 per cent of the world's poor women and girls would be living in South Asia. That figure has now been adjusted to 18.6 per cent due to the socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic.[38] Many women and girls living in households that have only recently escaped extreme poverty are at risk of being pushed back into poverty. Lack of access to personal income poses more challenges for women, particularly those who are partnered, than men at times of shocks and crises.[39]

It is also important to note there are 'hidden poor'. Poverty headcount ratios count all individuals living in households with a per capita income below international and national poverty lines as being poor and others being non-poor. Poverty rates of different population groups — such as women, men, children, older persons and persons with disabilities — are defined as the percentage of individuals of each group who live in poor households. This assumes that all household members enjoy the same standard of living and that resources within a household are allocated equally. This is likely to understate intrahousehold inequalities based on gender, age and other factors.[40] Evidence demonstrates that women's bargaining power within the household is affected by their educational attainment, income and assets. This power affects the extent to which women benefit from intrahousehold outcomes.[41] With the current household-level poverty measurement methodologies, individuals within households above the poverty line who are poor are invisible. This leaves many poor women and girls out of poverty statistics and deprive them of access to poverty targeting programmes related to education, healthcare and access to basic living standards. Additionally, the scale and depth of urban poverty is also often understated due to the over-reliance on poverty lines and the failure to consider poverty as a multidimensional concept. Poverty estimates do not take key variables impacting on urban living conditions — access to housing, infrastructure and services — sufficiently into consideration.[42]

FIGURE 2.3 **Projected change in gender poverty gap in South Asia**
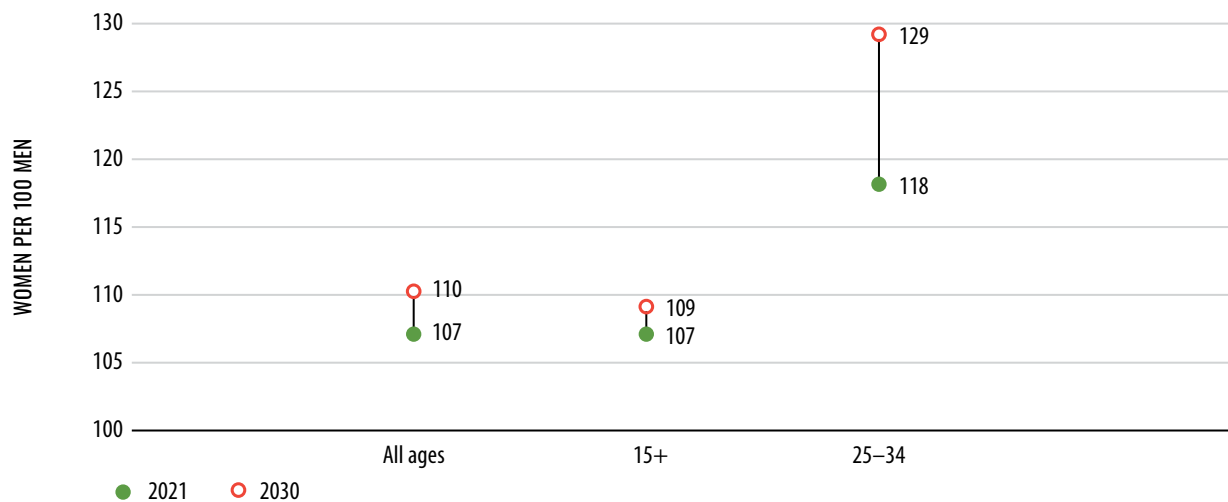
Source: See UN-Women (2020). From Insight to Action: Gender Equality in the Wake of COVID-19. UN-Women, New York. Available at: www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/09/gender-equality-in-the-wake-of-covid-19. The regional average for South Asia is driven largely by India and Bangladesh, given the two countries' large populations and projected increase in extreme poverty headcount. In both countries, GDP per capita was expected to revert to pre-pandemic levels by 2022, leading to a decrease in overall poverty rates dynamically. However, drivers of the age-sex poverty gap – such as fertility, wage gaps and welfare transfers – are not forecast to improve at comparable levels, leading to a worsening of poverty ratios.

37   The result is mainly driven by India and Bangladesh, given the two countries' large populations and projected increase in extreme poverty headcount.
38   UN-Women, *From Insight to Action: Gender Equality in the Wake of COVID-19* (New York, 2020).
39   Asian Development Bank (ADB) and UN-Women, *Two Years in: The lingering gendered effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in Asia and the Pacific* (Manila and Bangkok, 2022).
40   World Bank, "Gender differences in poverty and household composition through the life-cycle: A global perspective (English)", policy research working paper (Washington, D.C., 2018).
41   Cheryle Doss, "Intrahousehold Bargaining and Resource Allocation in Developing Countries", *The World Bank Research Observer*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (February 2013).
42   FAO, *Asia and the Pacific Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition* (Bangkok, 2022).

2.2.2 Multidimensional poverty

Yet **poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon.** Lack of money is only one of the disadvantages that poor people experience. Others, related to education, health, and standard of living,[43] should also be considered when monitoring progress towards eradicating poverty. Data from 20 Asia-Pacific countries show that non-monetary poverty exceeds monetary poverty in almost all countries.[44] As per the latest estimates in 2021, the region is home to half of the world's multidimensionally deprived, that is 495 million women and men, among whom 389 million live in South Asia.[45] It remains unclear to what extent regional multidimensional poverty estimates will evolve following the COVID-19 pandemic and other socioeconomic and political turbulences which have occurred since 2021.

Like monetary poverty, multidimensional poverty is mainly measured at the household level, or without gender disaggregation when measured at the individual level. Despite this limitation, **available sex-disaggregated data related to education, nutrition and health, as well as access to basic resources and facilities,[46] can help determine the extent to which multidimensional poverty affects women and girls.** The region is significantly behind in ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, ethnic minorities, and children in vulnerable situations.[47] Food insecurity is more prevalent among adult women and men in every region of the world. The gender gap in food insecurity widened considerably between 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, disproportionately affecting rural women and women in agrifood systems.[48] Food poverty continues to affect 130 million girls and boys in South Asia and 59 million in East Asia and the Pacific,[49] leading to nutrition deprivation for those in poorest households and many in better-off households.[50] Anaemia continues to affect women in the region, with 32.6 per cent of women and girls aged between 15 to 49 and 48.2 per cent of those living in South and South-West Asia most affected. A slight increase in anaemia prevalence rates is observed since 2015.[51]

Despite progress made, gaps remain in women's and girls' access to essential healthcare, including sexual and reproductive health services.[52] Women and girls have insufficient access to basic and safely managed water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services,[53] and electricity and clean fuels for cooking, heating and lighting.[54] Access to these public services and infrastructure is likely deteriorating due to the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic and shrinking public spending. Increasing climate-induced disaster risks and the global energy crisis due to the war in Ukraine are expected to carry further deleterious consequences for women's and girls' already unequal access.[55]

The intersectionality of gender and disability is found to increase the vulnerability to multidimensional poverty. Persons with disabilities are often among the poorest and most vulnerable segments of society. Data from national surveys compiled through the Disability Data Initiative are used to measure multidimensional poverty experienced by persons with disabilities in four domains: education, work, health and standard of living.[56] In all 15 Asia-Pacific countries measured, women with disabilities were more likely to live in multidimensional poverty than women without disabilities, men with disabilities and men without disabilities (Figure 2.4). Despite an increase in overall social protection expenditure on disability-specific programmes in the region,[57] a more comprehensive and responsive design of programmes is needed to consider the additional costs of disability and the intersectional challenges faced by women and girls with disabilities. More inclusive poverty-related data collection and intersectional analysis are important to help understand other population groups that are particularly vulnerable to poverty.

43   The Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) developed by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) measures three dimensions of poverty with ten indicators including: health (nutrition and child mortality), education (years of schooling and school attendance), and living standards (cooking fuel, sanitation, drinking water, electricity, housing and assets).

44   ESCAP, "SDG Goal Profile 1: Poverty", policy brief (Bangkok, 2024); ESCAP elaborations based on World Bank Poverty and Inequality Platform (2023) and Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) (Alkire et al., 2023).

45   UNDP, "Making Our Future: New Directions for Human Development in Asia and the Pacific", 2024 regional human development report (New York, 2023).

46   These indicators are often used to measure multidimensional poverty. The rest of Chapter 2 will look further into gender dimensions of health and education. Some also argue that multidimensional poverty measurement needs to account for other dimensions such as access to natural, economic and financial resources (discussed under Chapter 3 and Chapter 7) and contributing factors such as violence against women and girls (discussed under Chapter 4).

47   ESCAP, "SDG Goal Profile 4: Education", policy brief (Bangkok, 2022).

48   FAO, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023* (Rome, 2023).

49   See Annex 2 for regional groupings by FAO.

50   United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). *Child Food Poverty. Nutrition Deprivation in Early Childhood. Child Nutrition Report* (New York, 2024).

51   ESCAP Asia Pacific SDG Gateway. SDG 2.2.3. Available at https://data.unescap.org (Accessed on 5 February 2024).

52   ESCAP, "SDG Goal Profile 3: Good Health and Well-being", policy brief (Bangkok, 2021).

53   ESCAP, "SDG Goal Profile 6: Clean Water and Sanitation", policy brief (Bangkok, 2018).

54   ESCAP, "SDG Goal Profile 7: Affordable and Clean Energy", policy brief (Bangkok, 2023).

55   United Nations, "Review of the implementation of the agreed conclusions of the sixty-third session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Report of the Secretary-General", E/CN.6/2024/4 (New York, 2024).

56   See Annex 1 and Disability Data Initiative, "Method briefs: 6. Multidimensional poverty", web page. Available at: https://disabilitydata.ace.fordham.edu/method-briefs/6-multidimensional-poverty/ (accessed on 21 May 2024).

57   ADB, "Disability and social protection in Asia", *ADB Briefs No. 203* (Manila, 2021).

FIGURE 2.4 **Multidimensional poverty headcount ratio, by sex and disability status**
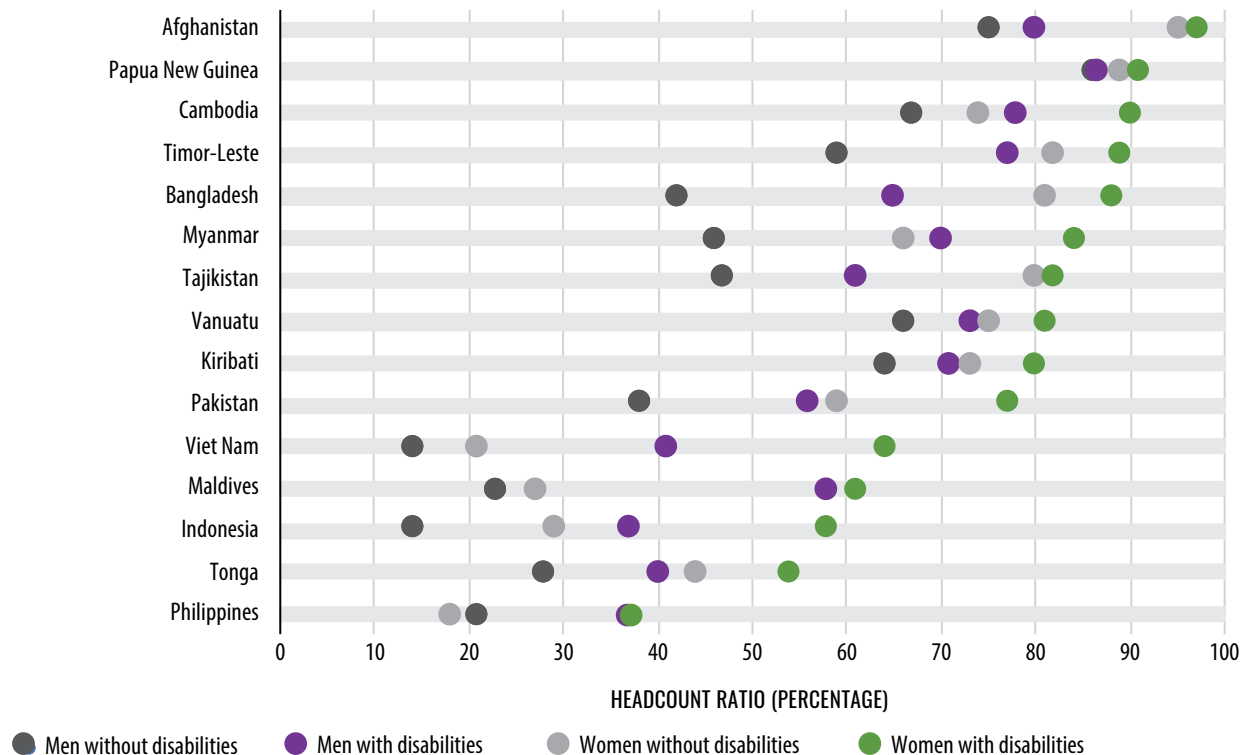
● Men without disabilities   ● Men with disabilities   ● Women without disabilities   ● Women with disabilities

Source: ESCAP elaboration based on Disability Data Initiative, "Results tables, Multidimensional analysis", web page. Available at: https://disabilitydata.ace.fordham.edu/result-tables/ (accessed on 21 May 2024).

Intersectional poverty analysis will inform tailored policies and programmes to address the particular needs of different population groups to ensure no one is left behind in poverty reduction.

The rural and urban divide also requires more poverty analysis and policy interventions. Urbanization is a regional trend that has complex implications on poverty and inequality in both urban and rural areas. Approximately 2.3 billion people, or 43 per cent of the region's population, live in urban areas, accounting for 60 per cent of the world's urban population. Accompanying rapid urbanization is the significant growth of non-agricultural sectors, which in many countries relies on massive labour flows from rural to urban areas. Across the Asia-Pacific region, regardless of country income levels, urban areas have a higher proportion of prime working-age population (15 to 49 years). In most countries with available data in Eastern Asia, South-Eastern Asia and the Pacific, women make up a higher share of urban prime working-age population as compared to rural areas. Whereas in Southern Asia, women tend to stay in rural areas while rural men migrate to urban areas in search of jobs.[58] The growth of cities across the region is characterised by the increasing

prevalence of urban poverty. Rural labour migrants often are vulnerable to food insecurity, poor health and nutrition, low standard of living, lack of formal job opportunities and poor housing conditions.[59] Compounded with a loss of social capital, the social safety net is absent for many poor rural migrants living in urban areas.

In the Asia-Pacific region, the share of agriculture in national GDPs has been steadily declining in the past decade.[60] Where women are more likely to be left in the rural homes, such as in Southern Asia, the shrinking agricultural growth is often compounded by the barriers rural women face to acquiring productive resources such as land and water, and accessing services such as financial services and agricultural machinery and agribusiness services. Women in rural areas suffer the consequences of the inequality in income and wealth distribution most acutely.[61] The increasing scarcity of natural resources and more frequent extreme weather events and disasters induced by climate change act as multipliers to the vulnerability of women and girls to poverty, especially in low- and lower-middle income countries where agriculture is the most important income generation sector for women. These phenomena

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58   FAO, *Asia and the Pacific Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition* (Bangkok, 2022).

59   Ibid.

60   Ibid.

61   Imai, Katsushi S. Bilal Malaeb, "Asia's Rural-urban Disparity in the Context of Growing Inequality", Research Series Issue 27, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) (Rome, 2018).

add pressure to women's income security and force many girls to leave school to help alleviate the increased household burden. Differentiated strategies and targeted investments are required to address urban and rural poverty, while collective actions are important to addressing root causes of poverty and inequalities linked to urbanization and the climate crisis.

The disproportionate burden of multidimensional poverty on women and girls is rooted in the entrenched discrimination and unequal power relations that they face, which systematically diminish their agency to make decisions and participate in economic, social and environmental activities, including actions to address poverty. For instance, women and girls are often responsible for providing for basic needs to their families in many developing countries, especially in rural, remote and impoverished communities. However, they are rarely involved in decision making and the workforce related to the building of infrastructure and services essential to people's basic needs. Such lack of empowerment increases the risk of women and girls experiencing poverty and lowers the efficiency of relevant investments. While cash transfers provide women a minimum income security, they do not automatically support broader goals of gender equality and the empowerment of women. If women's bargaining power, autonomy and financial and functional literacy remain weak, this undermines their ability to control how their income is used.[62] Lessons learned from the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in India, a large public works programme, suggest that increasing women's representation is key. Their leadership is needed in the planning, implementation and monitoring of programmes and in local governance. Transforming gender power dynamics and ensuring women control the use of their income are essential for increasing women's participation in MGNREGS and their ability to benefit from it.[63]

More and more development partners have also experimented with the cash plus approach which links direct cash transfers with interventions that support livelihood, education, health, nutrition and sanitation for the beneficiaries. In many cash plus programmes, social and behavioural change programmes are integrated as plus components, typically in relation to child health and nutrition and gender-based violence and harmful practices

such as early marriage. The cash plus approach is valuable in supporting the broader development and empowerment of groups in the deepest state of multidimensional poverty. A recent meta-analysis of 104 studies has shown that cash plus programmes that combine cash transfers with livelihoods interventions have had a meaningful impact and increased household consumption and income. However, they have been no more effective at changing labour force participation than cash only programmes.[64] Another meta-analysis that examined the efficiency of cash plush programmes with social and behaviour change components showed inconsistent value-adds to other outcome areas beyond poverty reduction, compared to cash only programmes.[65] Successful delivery of cash plus programmes has to depend on careful consideration of a complex set of operational elements, socioeconomic conditions in the target communities and contextual factors. Particular attention is also required to prevent unintended effects, especially where the plus components are imposed as conditionality for receiving cash benefits, on the beneficiaries. For instance, where mothers and other primary care givers are targeted beneficiaries of cash plus programmes, their unpaid care burden and time poverty could be exacerbated.

The persistence and even resurgence of poverty in our region is cause for alarm. Access to universal social protection coverage, health, education and skills development – which will be discussed in the rest of Chapter 2 – are crucial to addressing multidimensional poverty. Moreover, employment has been a critical means of lifting people out of poverty, if it is combined with decent work conditions. This will be discussed in Chapter 3.

It is also important to acknowledge that poverty reduction is a mission that cannot be achieved solely by governments. Rather, it requires actions that involve all segments of society. A whole-of-society approach is indispensable for mobilizing resources, innovations and investments to enable multifaceted solutions to poverty. This approach is equally important to transforming gender and social norms underlying inequalities within households and societies that lead to poverty gaps that disproportionately affect some individuals and population groups over others. Meanwhile, women's agency is strongly associated with their experience of multidimensional poverty and women's empowerment has a pivotal role in achieving poverty reduction. It must be placed at the heart of all action.

62   FAO, *The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems* (Rome, 2023).

63   Debmalya Nandy and Binju Abaraham. "Does NREGA work for women?", blog, 27 February 2020. Available at: https://idronline.org/does-nrega-work-for-women/ (accessed on 12 July 2024).

64   Leight, Jessica, Hirvonen, Kalle and Zafar, Sarim, "The effectiveness of cash and cash plus interventions on livelihoods outcomes: Evidence from a systematic review and meta-analysis", *International Food Policy Research Institute* (July 2024).

65   UNICEF, *What Works to Improve Outcomes for Children?,* UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti (Florence, 2024).

BOX 2.1 Targeted measures for women: from extreme poverty eradication to "common prosperity" in China

Poverty alleviation has been consistently a policy priority in China. In February 2021, the Government announced having lifted 770 million people out of extreme poverty since the launch of the "reform and opening-up" in 1978. The unprecedented pace and scale of China's poverty reduction can be attributed to broad-based economic transformation and impactful poverty alleviation strategies. The former, characterized by growing agricultural productivity, incremental industrialization, managed urbanization and rural-urban migration, as well as increased public investment in infrastructure, raised average incomes of the population in the context of rapid and sustained economic growth. Meanwhile, investment in social protection and targeted poverty alleviation strategies tailored for different geographic areas and population groups were instrumental to improving the livelihood and well-being of vulnerable populations, especially poor people in rural areas. The country's success in reducing extreme poverty was bolstered by effective governance, which enabled close interagency coordination within the government and multistakeholder collaboration on poverty reduction.[1]

Women are a key target group in China's poverty alleviation efforts. It is estimated that women accounted for approximately half of the nearly 100 million people in rural areas who were lifted out of poverty in the period 2012–2020. In implementing the Outline of Women's Development in China (2011–2020), China prioritized the empowerment of women to reduce poverty. A total of 10.2 million poor women participated in skills training and economic empowerment programmes, and more than half of them increased their incomes through employment, livelihood programmes and e-business. Small secured loans[2] and microcredits, amounting to more than 450 million Chinese yuan, were provided to assist 8.7 million poor women to start businesses and increase their incomes.[3] The national initiative on financial inclusion to enable high-quality development further expanded the scope of credit support to women's entrepreneurship. Between 2020 and 2023, the All-China Women's Federation mobilised business loans from commercial banks to over 10 million urban and rural women entrepreneurs, with the total value of more than 240 billion Chinese yuan or approximately 34 billion US dollars.[4, 5]

A nationwide programme has been implemented to provide universal, free-of-charge cervical and breast cancer screening for all women, complemented by financial support to low-income women who suffer from cervical and breast cancers with an annual fiscal budget of 2.7 billion Chinese yuan in 2023 alone.[6] The provision of free HPV vaccination to women and girls accumulated to 58 million doses in 2023, an increase of 4.7 times since 2020.[7] By the end of 2020, there were 44.3 million recipients of minimum living allowances in the country, with 40.7 per cent being women.[8] The Government provides partially or fully subsidized health insurance to women who receive minimum living allowances and those who live above the poverty line but remain at risk of falling back into poverty.

The elimination of extreme poverty does not mark the end of China's poverty reduction agenda, given that a considerable number of people still live with low levels of income. China has set a new goal of achieving significant progress towards "common prosperity" by 2035. This requires a shift of policy focus towards bridging gaps in accessing quality public services, addressing persistent inequalities in terms of incomes and economic opportunities, and mitigating risks for the most vulnerable populations in the transition to a greener, more urban and more service-oriented economy.[9] In this connection, the Outline of Women's Development in China (2021–2030) aims to realize the high-quality and all-round development of women. It specifies objectives and measures on expanding public services for women and families, improving the social protection system to meet women's needs, and strengthening support and services for women facing difficulties.[10] The Outline includes a specific target to enhance the capacities of low-income rural women for sustainable development. Good documentation and further analysis is needed to better understand the effectiveness of these measures in addressing gender inequalities in the national agenda for "common prosperity".

1   World Bank and Development Research Center of the State Council, the People's Republic of China, *Four Decades of Poverty Reduction in China: Drivers, Insights for the World, and the Way Ahead* (Washington, D.C., 2022).
2   The Government has set up a guarantee fund for secured small loans, primarily used as start-up funds and working capital for self-employment and entrepreneurship.
3   China, State Council Information Office, *Poverty Alleviation: China's Experience and Contribution* (Beijing, 2021).
4   Author's calculation with CNY – USD exchange rate, 20 September 2024.
5   China, National Bureau of Statistics, "Final statistical monitoring report on the implementation of China National Program for Women's Development (2011–2020)", press release, 31 December 2021. Available at https://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202112/t20211231_1825801.html (accessed on 3 June 2024).
6   China, National Working Committee on Children and Women under the State Council, *National report of the Beijing+30 review* (Beijing, 2024). Available at https://www.asiapacificgender.org/node/244.
7   Ibid.
8   China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *China's VNR Report on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (Beijing, 2021).
9   World Bank and Development Research Center of the State Council, the People's Republic of China, *Four Decades of Poverty Reduction in China: Drivers, Insights for the World, and the Way Ahead* (Washington, D.C., 2022).
10   China, State Council, "China to push forward high-quality development of women and children's affairs", web page. Available at http://english.www.gov.cn/premier/news/202108/25/content_WS61264237c6d0df57f98df254.html (accessed on 3 June 2024).

2.3 SOCIAL PROTECTION

Social protection can provide crucial income security to individuals and families and help ease disruptions from life contingencies that interrupt earning trajectories, such as having a child, losing a job, being injured or sick or becoming old, and address other economic and social vulnerabilities. It can also help mitigate economic downturns and the risks of widening inequalities amidst climate-induced disasters and food insecurity, population ageing, digitalization and the changing world of work.[66] However, women are disproportionately disadvantaged in social protection systems. Higher levels of protection are frequently provided through contributory schemes that are most likely tied with formal employment, to which women are often unable to contribute or contribute sufficiently, due to their disadvantage in highly gendered labour markets.

2.3.1 Overall access to social protection

Stark gaps persist in social protection coverage in Asia and the Pacific. Just above half (55.1 per cent) of the region's population have access to at least one social protection benefit, with the coverage rate ranging from the high of 81.1 per cent in North and Central Asia to the low of 36.6 per cent in South and South-West Asia.[67] The region covers 35.9 per cent of vulnerable populations in social assistance.[68] While non-contributory schemes still mostly target the poorest, contributory schemes are typically limited to those working in the formal sector. As a result, a number of groups – including many women, informal and self-employed workers, migrant workers, unpaid carers, older persons, persons with disabilities and rural residents who are more likely to engage in informal economies — fall out of any protection by contributory schemes that often provide higher levels of benefit.[69] Disability-related social protection remains significantly insufficient for both women and men in the region, despite the reality that persons with disabilities and their families usually incur a

higher cost of living due to accessibility barriers and lack of inclusiveness in public infrastructure, products and services. Just about one in three (33.6 per cent) persons with severe disabilities have access to disability cash benefits in the region.[70] Women with disabilities are more likely to receive disability cash benefits through non-contributory schemes while men with disabilities are more likely to receive mandatory contributory disability benefits.[71]

The COVID-19 pandemic and the socioeconomic shock waves it has emitted have exposed and exacerbated deep-seated inequalities and significant gaps in social protection coverage, comprehensiveness and adequacy across all countries.[72] Yet, out of the large amount of social protection and labour market measures adopted by governments in response to the pandemic, only 19 per cent in Central and Southern Asian countries[73] and 14 per cent in Eastern and South-Eastern and Oceanian countries[74] supported women's economic security or responded to the increased burden of unpaid care on women and girls during the pandemic.

Pervasive underinvestment continues to challenge social protection systems in Asia and the Pacific. Limited fiscal space and debt burdens in many countries constrain much needed investments in social sectors, especially social protection. The region's total expenditure on social protection (excluding health) is at 8.2 per cent of the regional GDP, significantly lower than the global average at 12.9 per cent. The expenditure levels in South-East Asia (2.5 per cent) and South and South-West Asia (4.4 per cent) are exceptionally low. The regional expenditure also varies significantly for different age groups: the expenditure level for children is at merely 0.5 per cent of GDP, at 2.4 per cent for working-age populations, and at 5.5 per cent for older persons.[75] While there is a positive correlation between the level of economic development and investment in social protection, countries with similar government budget sizes could make very different policy choices when it comes to spending on social protection.[76]

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66   ESCAP, *The Workforce We Need: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2022).

67   ESCAP elaboration based on ILO estimates, 2024; World Social Protection Database, based on the Social Security Inquiry; ISSA Social Security Programs Throughout the World; ILOSTAT; national sources. Regional and subregional aggregates are weighted by population. Healthcare and sickness benefits are excluded in the measurement.

68   Ibid. According to ILO, vulnerable persons include (a) all children; (b) persons of working age not contributing to a social insurance scheme or receiving contributory benefits; and (c) persons above retirement age not receiving contributory benefits (pensions). Social assistance is defined as all forms of non-contributory cash transfers financed from general taxation or other sources (other than social insurance). See International Labour Office. *World Social Protection Report 2017–19: Universal social protection to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals* (Geneva, 2017).

69   ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Regional Companion Report for Asia and the Pacific* (Geneva, 2021).

70   ESCAP, *Protecting our Future Today: Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific. Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2024).

71   ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social Protection at the Crossroads – in Pursuit of a Better Future* (Geneva, 2021).

72   Ibid.

73   UN-Women and UNDP, "Government responses to COVID-19: Lessons on gender equality for a world in turmoil", regional appendix: Central and Southern Asia (New York, 2022).

74   Ibid.

75   ESCAP elaboration based on ILO estimates, 2024; World Social Protection Database, based on the Social Security Inquiry; ISSA Social Security Programs Throughout the World; ILOSTAT; national sources. Global and regional aggregates are weighted by GDP for the year 2024.

76   ESCAP and ILO, *The Protection We Want: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (Bangkok, 2021).

FIGURE 2.5 **Cost of basic social protection package to halve poverty at national poverty line**
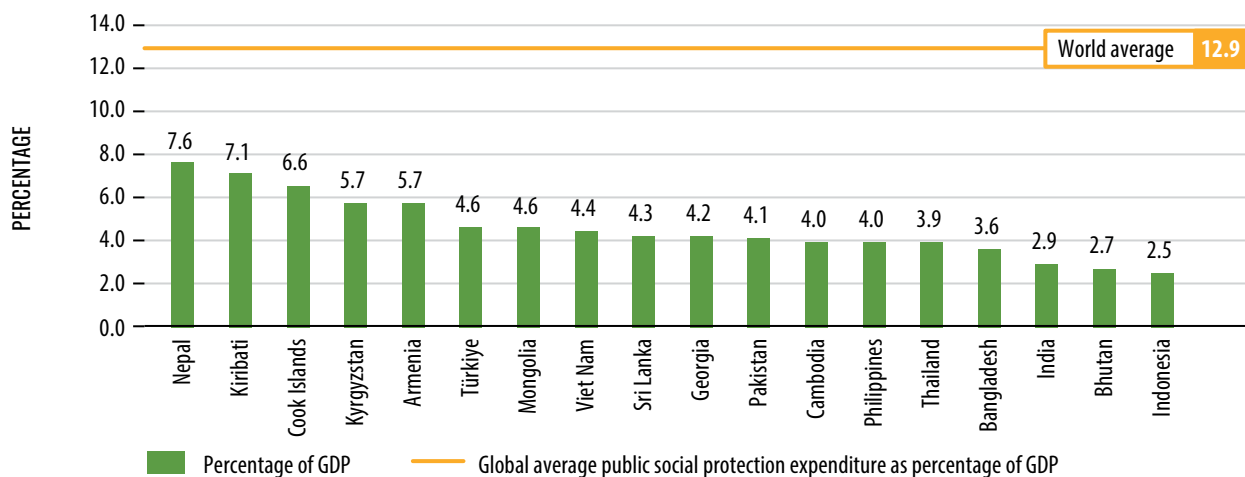
Source: ESCAP, *The Workforce We Need: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2022).

The silver lining of a tragic pandemic has been to propel countries into unprecedented policy action to address gaps in social protection.[77] Regrettably, many of these policy actions have not had a lasting effect. Independent cost estimations by ADB, ESCAP and ILO suggest that countries in Asia and the Pacific can make their social protection systems effective by a significant but affordable increase of public spending, within the annual range of 2 to 6.1 per cent of GDP, depending on the size of the benefits, the country's ambition, demographic situation and other variables.[78] In this context, ESCAP simulations show that many countries in the region could halve the proportion of population living in poverty according to national definitions (SDG 1.2) by 2030, with an estimated cost far below the current global average of public expenditure on social protection (Figure 2.5). In addition to increasing overall spending on social protection, applying gender-responsive budgets in social protection spending is also important for the accountability of social protection systems on their gender equality commitments.

Being a woman matters when it comes to accessing a social protection benefit. The lack of gender-responsiveness in the design of social protection systems contributes to the persistent and vast gender gaps in access to benefits. Contributory social protection schemes are primarily designed to favour full-time formally employed persons.[79] Due to reproductive responsibilities, disproportionate unpaid

care and domestic work burdens and gender-based discrimination, women have lower levels of labour force participation, lower average earnings, and more interrupted careers especially in formal employment (see further discussion in Chapter 3). National social protection schemes often fail to recognize these gender-related factors or the persistent structural barriers and gender-based discrimination women face at different life stages.[80] Gender-responsive social protection systems can help adjust entitlements, conditions and eligibility to avoid penalizing women for maternity, paid work interruptions and time dedicated to unpaid care and domestic work. They can compensate for disadvantages in social protection outcomes throughout the life cycle.[81] Integrating gender considerations in the design of social protection systems and benefits have been proven to have positive outcomes beyond poverty alleviation. They have demonstrable positive effects on girls' education, women's employment and enabling women to escape abusive relationships.[82]

2.3.2 Child benefits

Social protection for children comprises contributory or non-contributory cash transfers and tax credits for families or children. It can also be provided in the form of in-kind benefits such as school meals and benefits for those caring for children such as caregiver allowances or parental leave benefits. In particular, child benefits relate to the costs of raising

77   ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social Protection at the Crossroads – in Pursuit of a Better Future* (Geneva, 2021).
78   ESCAP and ILO, *The Protection We Want: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (Bangkok, 2021) and ADB, *COVID-19 and Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific: Projected Costs for 2020–2030* (Manila, 2021).
79   ESCAP, *How to Design Gender-Sensitive Social Protection Systems* (Bangkok, 2021).
80   ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social Protection at the Crossroads – in Pursuit of a Better Future* (Geneva, 2021).
81   ESCAP, *How to Design Gender-Sensitive Social Protection Systems* (Bangkok, 2021).
82   UN-Women, "Addressing violence against women through social protection: a review of the evidence", policy brief (New York, 2023).

a child. When provided through cash transfers, they can be used to support families in covering a range of costs associated with childcare and child rearing. Universal child benefits could significantly enhance children's nutrition, health, school attendance, and reduce child labour.[83]

Social protection coverage and benefit levels for children remain limited in Asia and the Pacific. While the region is home to more than two thirds of the world's children living in poverty,[84] only 25.0 per cent of children (aged 0–15 years) are covered by social protection benefits, significantly lower than the global average (28.2 per cent). The coverage rate is even lower for children aged 0–18 years old (19.3 per cent). The coverage rate for children aged 0 to 18 years old is 57.4 per cent in North and Central Asia, 47.0 per cent in the Pacific, 25.7 per cent in South-East Asia, 19.4 per cent in South and South-West Asia, and merely 6.6 per cent in East and North-East Asia. Low coverage rates in South and South-West Asia, South-East Asia, and East and North-East Asia are accompanied by significantly lower expenditure on social protection for children. This expenditure stands at 0.5 per cent of the subregional GDP or less, as compared to 1.4 per cent in North and Central Asia and 1.9 per cent in the Pacific.[85]

Universal benefits are not within reach for most children and families in the region. UNICEF analysis reveals that only 12 out of 46 Asia-Pacific countries reviewed had statutory contributory or non-contributory schemes for children.[86] Age eligibility also varies, with some countries covering only early childhood, while others cover children until the age of 18, such as **Georgia, Kazakhstan, Russian Federation** and **Türkiye**.[87] The majority of non-contributory schemes in the region are poverty targeted cash or in-kind benefits with restricted reach and high exclusion errors that exclude many intended beneficiaries.[88] Conditionality remains a challenge to make child benefits universal, with the predominant schemes in the region being conditional cash transfers that attach behavioural

obligations (e.g., reporting) and caregiving burdens primarily on mothers who are the main recipients of these benefits.[89] Several countries in the region have advanced by combining contributory and non-contributory schemes, with **Japan** achieving near universal coverage; **Thailand** providing quasi universal unconditional child benefits; and **Mongolia** providing universal benefits.[90]

Coverage of children in social protection systems is stymied by the lack of civil registration in the region. A birth certificate is often required to enjoy social protection benefits, access free vaccination and immunization, and enrol in schools.[91] However, 65 million (nearly one in five) children under the age of five were unregistered in Asia and the Pacific, with 78.5 per cent of them residing in South and South-West Asia.[92] Among those registered, around one in four (or 97 million) still do not have a birth certificate to prove their identity. The likelihood of infants under the age of one to be registered and have a birth certificate is even lower.[93] Children under the age of one, those living in poorer households (from the bottom 40 per cent of the wealth distribution), those whose mothers have lower education attainment are less likely to have completed birth registration. The registration pattern based on sex of the child varies across countries, with girls less likely to complete birth registration in some countries and boys in others. Additionally, living in rural areas is only found to be a disadvantage indicator for the completion of birth registration in Armenia and Papua New Guinea among the 27 countries analysed.[94]

The absence of universal child benefits has implications on various vulnerabilities. It may aggravate the already high levels of childhood poverty. It also heightens the risks of early marriage and forces adolescent girls out of school to care for siblings and the family, as other family members have to generate income. Additionally, without universal child benefits, families' access to quality childcare services is limited which often translates into unpaid care burdens for women as they are disproportionately the caregivers.[95]

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83   ESCAP, "How to design child benefits", social development policy guides (Bangkok, 2022).

84   ESCAP and ILO, *The Protection We Want: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (Bangkok, 2021).

85   ESCAP elaboration based on ILO estimates, 2024; World Social Protection Database, based on the Social Security Inquiry; ISSA Social Security Programs Throughout the World; ILOSTAT; national sources. Regional and subregional aggregates are weighted by population.

86   UNICEF, *Social Protection in East Asia and the Pacific: From Evidence to Action for Children* (Bangkok, 2023).

87   ESCAP, *Protecting our Future Today: Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific. Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2024).

88   Ibid.

89   ESCAP, "How to design child benefits", social development policy guides (Bangkok, 2022).

90   ILO-UNICEF, "Towards universal social protection for children: Achieving SDG 1.3", joint report on social protection for children (Geneva and New York, 2019) and ILO-UNICEF, "More than a billion reasons: The urgent need to build universal social protection for children", joint report on social protection for children (Geneva and New York, 2019).

91   ESCAP, "Inequality of opportunity in Asia and the Pacific: Birth registration", social development policy paper (Bangkok, 2024).

92   See Annex 2 for regional groupings by ESCAP.

93   UNICEF, *A Statistical Profile of Birth Registration in Asia and the Pacific* (New York, 2021).

94   ESCAP, "Inequality of opportunity in Asia and the Pacific: Birth registration", social development policy paper (Bangkok, 2024).

95   ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Regional Companion Report for Asia and the Pacific* (Geneva, 2021).

2.3.3 Maternity protection

Many women in Asia and the Pacific are still left without sufficient maternity protection. Even though 41 countries in Asia and the Pacific have instituted statutory maternity leave benefits,[96] only 39.7 per cent of women with newborns in the region receive maternity cash benefits — above the global average (36.4 per cent).[97] The coverage rates vary widely between countries. **Mongolia** and **New Zealand** have achieved universal maternity cash benefits while less than 2 per cent of women giving birth are covered in some countries (Figure 2.6).[98] For those covered, the length of their maternity leave is often shorter than the internationally established standard of at least 14 weeks and payment is often less than at least two thirds of the regular salary, as stipulated by the ILO Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183). Only 24 countries in the region meet the 14-week minimum requirement.[99] Schemes vary significantly in terms of the benefit level and income replacement.[100] Meanwhile, 30 countries and territories in the region have adopted legislation that prohibits the dismissal of pregnant workers.[101]

Low coverage is largely due to the fact that maternity protection is mainly provided through work-related mandatory contributory schemes. The majority of maternity protection schemes in the region are provided through work-related mandatory contributory schemes, followed by voluntary contributory schemes. Only a small number of schemes are non-contributory. With almost two thirds of women of reproductive age in the region engaged in informal employment,[102] maternity benefits remain out of reach to large numbers of women in the region. Some groups face particular barriers. For instance, women migrant workers are disproportionally disadvantaged during pregnancy and childbirth. Many women migrants in the region are young, poor and with limited education; as such, they often work in unregulated sectors and in poor working conditions. They earn low wages and do not have access to social protection and health care.[103] Those who move across borders to make a living face even more barriers to access maternity protection and any form of social protection. Even for working women who may be eligible, many fail to meet qualifying criteria, such as the required number of years contributing to the scheme, due to interruption in their careers to attend to reproductive and care duties.

FIGURE 2.6 **Percentage of women giving birth receiving maternity cash benefits, by country, latest available year**
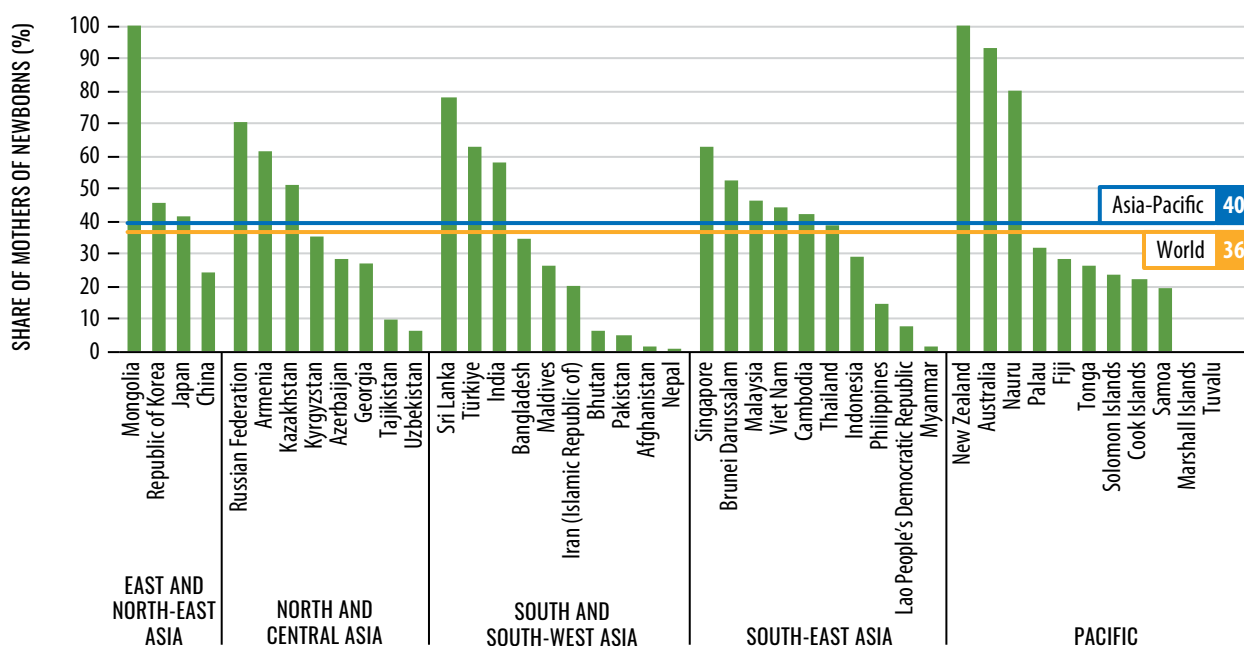
Source: ESCAP elaboration based on ILO estimates, 2024; World Social Protection Database, based on the Social Security Inquiry; ISSA Social Security Programs Throughout the World; ILOSTAT; national sources, accessed on 22 July 2024. Regional and subregional aggregates are weighted by population.

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96 ESCAP, *Protecting our Future Today: Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific. Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2024).

97 ESCAP elaboration based on ILO estimates, 2024; World Social Protection Database, based on the Social Security Inquiry; ISSA Social Security Programs Throughout the World; ILOSTAT; national sources. Regional and subregional aggregates are weighted by population.

98 ESCAP elaboration based on ILO estimates, 2024; World Social Protection Database, based on the Social Security Inquiry; ISSA Social Security Programs Throughout the World; ILOSTAT; national sources. Regional and subregional aggregates are weighted by population.

99 ESCAP, *Protecting our Future Today: Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific. Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2024).

100 ESCAP and ILO, *The Protection We Want: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (Bangkok, 2021).

101 World Bank, "Women, Business and the Law 2.0 Data for 2024: Legal frameworks", database. Available at: https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl-data (accessed on 2 August 2024).

102 ESCAP, *Protecting our Future Today: Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific. Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2024).

103 ILO, *Asian Decent Work Decade Resource Kit: Protecting Migrant Workers* (Geneva, 2011).

Most countries continue to rely on employer liability schemes. In most countries in the region, maternity cash benefits are solely financed by contributions by employers. This scheme has been found to motivate discrimination against women in hiring and career progression. Employers may be more reluctant to hire a woman due to the increased likelihood of having to pay for a future maternity benefit.[104] Several countries have made efforts to reduce reliance on employer liability schemes. For instance, in **China, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Thailand**, maternity cash benefits are primarily provided under a social insurance scheme co-financed by employers, employees and the Government.[105] However, the coverage of self-employed, informally employed and unemployed women remains very limited, if it exists at all. Some countries have explored measures to expand the coverage of women in contributory schemes. In **China**, for example, some provinces have piloted a modified social health insurance (including maternity insurance) contributory mechanism since 2022 that uses the unemployment insurance fund to continue contribution to social health insurance for women who are registered as unemployed while allowing self-employed and informally employed women to contribute to social health insurance.[106]

Non-contributory schemes are important for extending coverage of maternity benefits to all. Non-contributory schemes that could cover women in informal employment or outside the labour force are scarce.[107] Several countries in the region, such as **Armenia, Australia, India, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia and New Zealand**, have established non-contributory maternity benefit schemes.[108] In **Mongolia**, under the Social Welfare Scheme, maternity benefits are provided to all pregnant women and mothers of infants from the fifth month of pregnancy for 12 months, regardless of their contribution to the social insurance scheme. Those covered by the social insurance scheme receive additional benefits.[109] An ESCAP scenario-based simulation[110] in 27 Asia-Pacific countries demonstrates that introducing universal non-contributory maternity benefits at a basic benefit level for a duration of 18 weeks[111] can ensure that a majority of newborn mothers do not have to raise their infants in poverty. In **Maldives** and **Uzbekistan**, it would lift every single newborn mother above the national and respective international poverty lines. Across all countries tested, it would guarantee coverage of the high proportion of female informal workers and other mothers who were hitherto excluded, for costs ranging between 0.1 and 0.4 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).[112]

Adolescent and younger mothers face particular discrimination in access to maternity cash benefits. In many countries, especially where maternity protection schemes are provided to employed women only, the age threshold for maternity cash benefits excludes adolescent girls, pregnant women and mothers. Where early marriage, early pregnancy and adolescent fertility rates are high, large numbers of adolescent and younger mothers are deprived of benefits, making them even more vulnerable to poverty, deprivation of education, life-long health consequences and violence.

Despite their positive effects on sharing unpaid work and women's labour force participation, paternity and gender-equitable parental benefits continue to play a small role in the region. Increasingly, paternity benefits (often in the form of paid leave entitlement extended to fathers with newborns) and gender-equitable parental benefits (paid parental leaves that can be shared between parents) are considered to have positive effects on the greater involvement of fathers in child-rearing and a fairer sharing of family responsibilities. This is especially the case when the portion of paternity benefits is not transferable.[113] Moreover, reducing the gap between mothers' and fathers' parental leave days is found to correlate with greater participation of women in the labour market, particularly in East Asia and the Pacific, and South Asia.[114, 115]

Many countries and territories around the world have increased their statutory paternity or parental leave provisions. In the Asia-Pacific region, Australia; Bhutan; Hong Kong, China; Iran (Islamic Republic of);

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104 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Paid parental leave: Lessons from OECD countries and selected U.S. states", OECD Social, Employment and Migration working paper (Paris, 2015).

105 Mehrotra, "Can Asia Assure Social Insurance for All Its Informal Workers?", *Asia-Pacific Sustainable Development Journal*, Vol. 29, No.2 (November 2022).

106 China, National Working Committee on Children and Women under the State Council, *National report of the Beijing+30 review* (Beijing, 2024). Available at https://www.asiapacificgender.org/node/244.

107 ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Regional Companion Report for Asia and the Pacific* (Geneva, 2021).

108 ESCAP and ILO, *The Protection We Want: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific (*Bangkok, 2021).

109 World Bank, ILO, UNICEF and others, *Universal Social Protection: The Universal Child Money Programme in Mongolia* (Ulaanbaatar, 2016).

110 ESCAP, "ESCAP Spot Stimulator", database. Available at: https://spot.unescap.org/simulator (accessed on 1 August 2024).

111 As recommended by ILO through Maternity Protection Recommendation No. 191.

112 Sayuri Cocco Okada, "Maternity benefits: A critical tool to ensure mothers and their newborns are free from poverty", blog, Available at: https://www.unescap.org/blog/maternity-benefits-critical-tool-ensure-mothers-and-their-newborns-are-free-poverty (accessed on 11 March 2024).

113 ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social Protection at the Crossroads – in Pursuit of a Better Future* (Geneva, 2021).

114 World Bank, "The evolution of maternity and paternity leave policies over five decades: A global analysis", policy research working paper (October 2022).

115 See Annex 2 for regional and subregional groupings.

Japan; Lao People's Democratic Republic; Maldives; New Zealand; the Republic of Korea; Samoa; Singapore; Timor-Leste; Türkiye; and Viet Nam have introduced statutory paid paternity leaves.[116] In some other countries and territories, paid paternity leave may be granted on a non-statutory basis. On the other hand, in countries where shared parental leave has been introduced, fathers often are not using it. Notably, in 2021, the male share of users of paid parental leave is only 22.7 per cent in the Republic of Korea and about 15 per cent in Japan; and in Australia and New Zealand, even only one in every hundred users of paid parental leave or less is a man. In contrast, the usage rates of paid parental leave are much higher in countries where the quota of paid parental leave for fathers is not transferable.[117] Apart from the legal entitlement, whether fathers share parental leave and the length of the leave they actually take may be associated with employers' attitudes in practice and social norms.

2.3.4   Old-age pension

The proportion of persons aged 65 years and over in the region is set to double to one fifth of the population by 2050, that is to over 1 billion older persons.[118] The older the total population, the greater the proportion of women, who tend to live longer. This is especially true in North and Central Asia, largely owing to the historically high mortality rates among adult men.[119] Globally, women aged 55 to 59 are more likely to live in extreme poverty than men (8 per cent compared to 6.9 per cent), and those aged 60 and above are more likely to experience relative poverty[120] than men of the same age group.[121] Estimates in Asia and the Pacific found that in one-person households where older persons are in greater need of social protection benefits due to the lack of direct support from active family members, older women face a 27 per cent higher risk of living below the national poverty line compared to their male counterparts in the same household type.[122]

In this context, old-age pensions play a central role in enabling older persons to live independently and in dignity.

Coverage of old-age pensions fares better than other schemes in the Asia-Pacific region, with 78.0 per cent of women and men above statutory retirement age receiving a pension. Yet, the coverage is highly uneven across subregions, with the lowest coverage rates in South-East Asia (45.6 per cent) and South and South-West Asia (49.2 per cent) and the highest rates in the Pacific (74.4 per cent), East and North-East Asia (98.8 per cent), and North and Central Asia (99.2 per cent). This drastic contrast between subregions can be explained by the variance in government spending on old-age pensions. **The gender gap (in favour of men) in access to old-age pensions** (including contributory and tax-financed benefits) **is most acute in South and South-West Asia** (with a gap of 14.2 percentage points) **and in South-East Asia** (with a gap of 12.5 percentage points).[123]

The level of pension benefits is often not adequate for older persons, in particular older women. Pension benefits are often linked to employment and earnings. Contributory old-age pension schemes provide higher levels of income security. Only 44.1 per cent of working-age men and 30.3 per cent of working-age women in Asia and the Pacific actively contribute to an old-age pension scheme, with a wide gender divide of close to 14 percentage points.[124] The expansion of tax-financed non-contributory pensions in some countries such as **Bangladesh, Nepal, the Philippines, Thailand** and **Viet Nam**[125] could reduce inequalities in access to pension benefits by covering those who are not eligible for contributory schemes. However, limitations remain in coverage and benefit levels.[126] Many older women are still not eligible and those who rely on non-contributory pensions often struggle with even lower benefit levels. With higher life expectancies, older women are left to live without adequate income security for a longer period of time.

116 World Bank, *Women, Business, and the Law 2019: A Decade of Reform* (Washington, D.C, 2019).

117 OECD, "PF2.2: Parents' use of childbirth-related leave", database. Available at: https://web-archive.oecd.org/temp/2024-06-21/69263-database.htm (accessed on 2 August 2024).

118 UN DESA, Population Division. "World Population Prospects 2022 Special Aggregates", database. Available at https://population.un.org/dataportal/home (accessed on 2 August 2024).

119 ESCAP, "Review of progress made towards the implementation of the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Population and Development, as well as of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the key actions for its further implementation in Asia and the Pacific", note by the secretariat, ESCAP/APPC(7)/2/Rev.1 (Bangkok, 2023).

120 Relative Poverty measures individuals who have income below 60 per cent of the median incomes.

121 UN-Women and UN DESA, *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The gender snapshot 2023* (New York, 2023).

122 ESCAP elaboration based on household expenditure survey data from 27 member States. ESCAP, *Protecting our Future Today: Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific. Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2024).

123 ESCAP elaboration based on ILO estimates, 2024; World Social Protection Database, based on the Social Security Inquiry; ISSA Social Security Programs Throughout the World; ILOSTAT; national sources, accessed on 22 July 2024. Regional and subregional aggregates are weighted by population.

124 Ibid.

125 Ibid.

126 ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social Protection at the Crossroads – in Pursuit of a Better Future* (Geneva, 2021).

BOX 2.2   Efforts to close gender pension gaps in Asia-Pacific countries

Closing the gender pension gaps requires concerted action to address structural challenges in the labour market and gender norms and practices with regard to unpaid care and domestic work responsibilities, which disproportionately affect women and girls. Meanwhile, proactive pension system reforms conducted with a gender lens should be a priority in Asia and the Pacific given the rapid population ageing trends. Some countries in the region have put forward policy actions to enhance the coverage and adequacy of old-age pensions for women.

Eliminating retirement age differentials enables women to work and contribute to the pension system for a longer duration. Additionally, it facilitates women's access to training opportunities, career development and higher-ranking positions with better pay, leading to increased retirement benefits. On the other hand, **reducing minimum qualifying conditions** can enhance pension coverage for women, considering their typically shorter contributory histories compared to men. In **Viet Nam**, the 2019 Labour Code sets out a gradual increase in the retirement age, which will rise from 55 to 60 years by 2035 for women and from 60 to 62 years by 2028 for men. This adjustment will narrow the gender gap in retirement age to two years. Moreover, Party Resolution No. 28-NQ/TW proposes shortening the qualifying period for a retirement pension from the current 20 years to 15 years in 2024 and further to 10 years in 2028. These measures potentially have a positive impact on realizing gender equality in the pension system.[1]

Some pension systems have established **care credits to offset women's contribution interruptions.** Women often take time out of work to care for children, older persons and other family members. These interruptions may reduce their working life, contribution records and the earnings used to compute pension entitlements, thereby decreasing pension benefit levels. To address this issue, in **Armenia**, the period of care provided by one of the parents to children until each child reaches the age of two, but for no more than six years in total, contributes to the length of service required for an old-age pension.[2] In **Japan,** periods spent out of paid work for childcare are credited in the earnings-related pension scheme up to three years for each child and until the last child is three years old, during which contributions based on the last earnings before the childcare period are considered to be made.[3] In **Pakistan**, according to the Sindh Employees Old Age Benefits Act 2014, periods during which maternity benefit is paid are regarded as contribution periods when determining eligibility for an old-age pension.[4]

Non-contributory and universal pension schemes tend to favour women, mitigating their relatively low access to contributory schemes for employees in the formal sector. In **Fiji**, the introduction and expansion of the Social Pension Scheme, a non-contributory pension for older persons aged 65 years and above who have never received superannuation through the Fiji National Provident Fund, played a crucial role in national efforts to approach universal coverage of old-age pensions.[5] In **Bangladesh**, a universal pension programme was initiated in 2023 as a pathway towards self-sustained retirement for all citizens. Four distinct schemes have been introduced, targeting employees of private companies, workers in the informal sector, individuals living below the poverty line and citizens living abroad.[6]

Indexing pensions to inflation reduces the vulnerability of older women to poverty. Women tend to have longer retirement periods due to their lower retirement ages and longer life expectancies compared to men. While many developing countries apply discretionary increases, often dependent on budget availability, inflation indexation is advisable to maintain the purchasing power of pensions in payment.[7] In **New Zealand**, the public pension rate is adjusted annually in line with the Consumer Price Index and maintains a relationship with the average net-of-tax weekly wage. In the **Republic of Korea**, both contribution-based and targeted basic pension benefits in payment are indexed to prices.[8]

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1   ILO, *Adapting Social Insurance to Women's Life Courses: A Gender Impact Assessment of Viet Nam* (Geneva, 2021).

2   World Bank, "Women, Business and the Law 2022, Armenia", brief (Washington, D.C., 2022) and World Bank, *Women, Business and the Law: Saving for Old Age* (Washington, D.C., 2017).

3   OECD, *Pensions at a Glance 2023: OECD and G20 Indicators* (Paris, 2023).

4   World Bank, "Women, Business and the Law, economy summary: Pakistan", brief (Washington, D.C., 2021).

5   United Nations DESA and ILO, *Global Research on Governance and Social Protection: Case Studies on Mauritius and Fiji* (New York, 2021).

6   United Nations Bangladesh, "Fulfilling social protection for older persons in Bangladesh", web page. Available at https://bangladesh.un.org/en/248154-fulfilling-social-protection-older-persons-bangladesh (accessed on 4 June 2024).

7   *World Bank*, "The gender pension gap: What does it tell us and what should be done about it?", *blog*, 27 June 2023. Available at https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/jobs/gender-pension-gap-what-does-it-tell-us-and-what-should-be-done-about-it (accessed on 4 June 2024).

8   OECD, *Pensions at a Glance 2023: OECD and G20 Indicators* (Paris, 2023).

Both the causes and consequences of the pension gaps are gendered. Lower labour force participation, more frequent career interruptions, engagement in part-time or informal employment due to unpaid care and domestic work responsibilities, wage gaps, and lower mandatory retirement ages[127] that disadvantage women, all contribute to the lower coverage and benefit levels for women under old-age pension schemes in Asia and the Pacific. In the absence of sufficient income security, older persons have to continue working in old age or rely primarily on other family members for their basic needs and elderly care. Older women without pensions struggle even more. They cannot afford elderly care services and are unable to bargain for care provided by other family members, while at the same time having to care for their ageing spouses or partners. Meanwhile, reliance on families for care, primarily shouldered by women, further increases the unpaid care burden and limits their access to employment opportunities and contributory pensions.

Adjustments to the design of contributory and non-contributory pension schemes need to be gender responsive. Adjustments are needed to the eligibility, contribution rates and benefit levels of schemes. Pensionable and retirement ages must be reconsidered. Schemes should account and compensate for gendered work patterns, structural barriers faced by women in the labour market, and the unequal division of unpaid care responsibilities between women and men. Gender considerations are being accorded higher importance in public debates on pension reforms and design of policies. These include adjusting eligibility criteria to make pensions more accessible for women such as expanding contributory pension coverage to self-employed and informal workers among whom women are concentrated (Bangladesh, India, Thailand);[128] aligning women's and men's pensionable and retirement ages (Viet Nam, China and French Polynesia);[129] including care-related contribution credits to mitigate the negative impacts of unpaid care burden on women's

contributory capacity and duration (Armenia, Japan and Pakistan);[130, 131, 132] expanding the coverage and increase benefit levels of non-contributory pension schemes (Bangladesh and Fiji).[133, 134] In response to rapid population ageing across the region, there is an urgent need for Asia-Pacific countries to design gender-responsive and financially sustainable pension systems that provide adequate coverage and benefit levels for all women and men.

2.3.5 Social health protection

Good health is central to human capital and is in itself a basic human right. Social health protection guarantees access to essential health services without hardship and impoverishment. When a service is not covered, individuals are either discouraged to seek health care or forced to pay for the full costs, thereby imposing financial risks on those in need of healthcare and on their families. Social health protection is essential for Asia and the Pacific where catastrophic out-of-pocket (OOP) health spending threatens to push more people into poverty than anywhere else. The region has made significant progress towards social health protection coverage. However, more than one third of the region's population is still not protected by any health care scheme — that is 1.6 billion women and men.[135] This is accompanied by pervasively low levels of government expenditure on health, especially in South and South-West Asia (1.7 per cent of GDP) and in South-East Asia (2.5 per cent of GDP), which has led to high OOP spending for people and families as well as limitations in the accessibility, range and quality of healthcare services.[136]

The financing of social health protection in many countries continue to rely greatly on social security contributions;[137] women and men with limited contributory capacity are often left with inadequate protection. Women, young people, older persons, rural residents, persons with disabilities, migrants and refugees are disproportionately disadvantaged, because they are more likely to engage in informal and

127 ESCAP, *Asia-Pacific Report on Population Ageing 2022: Trends, policies and good practices regarding older persons and population ageing* (United Nations publication, 2022).
128 Among the four pension schemes introduced under the Universal Pension Scheme 2023 in Bangladesh, Surokkha caters to workers in the informal sectors such as farmers and informal workers. See https://bangladesh.un.org/en/248154-fulfilling-social-protection-older-persons-bangladesh. In India, the co-contributory pension scheme Swavalamban and the Atal Pension Yojana target workers in the unorganized sector. See Agewell Foundation, "Status of Social Security and Social Protection Floors in India (Focus on Older Persons)", Research & Advocacy Centre (For Needs & Rights of Older People) (2019). https://www.agewellfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Social-Security-in-India-2019.pdfIn Thailand, domestic workers, including those employed through a service provider and those directly employed by households (and thus not recognized as a formal employment relationship) are eligible to contribute to the Social Security Fund under Section 33 or Section 39 which provide old-age pension. UN-Women survey in 2022 found that men domestic workers are more likely to be insured under these schemes than women domestic workers. See ILO, "Policy review on social security for domestic workers in Thailand" (Bangkok, 2023), available at: https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@asia/@ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_880027.pdf.
129 ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social Protection at the Crossroads – in Pursuit of a Better Future* (Geneva, 2021).
130 World Bank, "Women, Business and the Law 2022, Armenia", brief (Washington, D.C., 2022) and World Bank, Women, Business and the Law: Saving for Old Age (Washington, D.C., 2017).
131 OECD, *Pensions at a Glance 2023: OECD and G20 Indicators* (Paris, 2023).
132 World Bank, "Women, Business and the Law, economy summary: Pakistan", brief (Washington, D.C., 2021).
133 United Nations Bangladesh, "Fulfilling social protection for older persons in Bangladesh", web page. Available at https://bangladesh.un.org/en/248154-fulfilling-social-protection-older-persons-bangladesh (accessed on 4 June 2024).
134 United Nations DESA and ILO, Global Research on Governance and Social Protection: Case Studies on Mauritius and Fiji (New York, 2021).
135 ESCAP, *The Workforce We Need: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication,2022).
136 Ibid.
137 ILO, *Financing Social Health Protection in Asia and the Pacific* (Geneva, 2021).

vulnerable work.[138] As a result, on average, 12 per cent of lower-income earners in the region report poor health, compared to 5 per cent among higher-income individuals.[139] Moreover, while many countries have made good progress towards providing prenatal and postnatal care to women, the inclusion of sexual and reproductive health services in "essential service packages" that are covered by social health protection benefits is limited, especially for adolescent girls and older women.[140] The COVID-19 pandemic pushed countries into making rapid increases in healthcare investment during the crisis response period, with some directed towards strengthening national healthcare infrastructures.[141] More needs to be done by countries to increase healthcare expenditure and direct resources to address inequalities in coverage, adequacy, accessibility and quality of healthcare for all.

The COVID-19 pandemic has once again proven the urgent need for universal social protection to prepare people — especially population groups in more vulnerable situations — for future shocks. For Asia and the Pacific, social protection also needs to respond to major trends, including population ageing, digital and technological transformation, natural disasters and climate change. These megatrends are placing increasing pressure on countries in the region to sufficiently finance social protection reforms while imposing a much more complex range of inequalities — including but not limited to gender ones — for them to address in the design and implementation of social protection systems. Developing countries' capacity to address poverty and these megatrends by applying social protection measures has been limited by shrinking fiscal space due to the exigencies of the COVID-19 response and recovery effort and the cost-of-living, food, fuel and debt crises.[142] Smarter fiscal strategies and more accountable fiscal spending are urgently needed. Ensuring gender responsiveness of the various strategies and actions for effective social protection systems reform,[143] including incorporating considerations to address gender-related social norms and behavioural patterns, is the key for social protection to address gender inequalities faced by women and girls in the region.

2.4 SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

The design of essential health service package is essential to the quality of universal health coverage. **Among all components of essential health service packages, access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services can have a unique impact on women and girls over the course of their life.** Law and regulations that guarantee full and equal access to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education exist in 29 Asia-Pacific countries.[144] **Yet, the inclusion of SRH services[145] in essential health services is selective in many countries.**

The UHC Declaration of the 2019 United Nations General Assembly re-emphasized commitments on achieving universal access to SRH services and reproductive rights as stated in the SDGs. Through the political declaration of the high-level meeting on universal health coverage in 2023,[146] Member States reaffirmed their commitment to providing universal access to SRH services and reproductive rights in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the BPfA. The Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Population and Development, adopted at the Sixth Asian and Pacific Population Conference in 2013, called for prioritizing policies and programmes to achieve universal access to comprehensive and integrated quality sexual and reproductive health services for all women, men and young people.[147] In Asia and the Pacific, law and regulations that guarantee full and equal access to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education (SDG 5.6.2) exist in 29 countries.[148]

Despite these global and regional political commitments, little progress has been made in the Asia-Pacific region since 2015 to increase coverage of SRH services, as shown by the UHC index monitored by WHO which includes a sub-index on reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health (RMNCH). Most of the progress made in service coverage was made prior to 2015, with a plateau observed in the Western Pacific subregion and a decline in the South-East Asia

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138 ESCAP, *The Workforce We Need: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations Publication, 2022).

139 Ibid.

140 ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Regional Companion Report for Asia and the Pacific* (Geneva, 2021).

141 Ibid.

142 United Nations, "Review of the implementation of the agreed conclusions of the sixty-third session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Report of the Secretary-General", E/CN.6/2024/4 (New York, 2024).

143 ESCAP, *Protecting our Future Today: Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific. Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2024).

144 ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicators by SDG: 5.6.2- Number of countries with laws and regulations that guarantee full and equal access to women and men aged 15 years and older to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education", database. Available at https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 4 June 2024).

145 By WHO definition, SRH services package shall include family planning, maternal and new-born care, treatment for curable sexually transmitted infections. WHO, "Investing in sexual and productive health and rights: essential elements of universal health coverage", technical brief (Geneva, 2023).

146 United Nations, "Political declaration of the high-level meeting on universal health coverage", A/RES/78/4 (New York, 2023).

147 ESCAP, "Gender equality and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights in Asia and the Pacific", ESCAP/APPC(7)/INF/3 (Bangkok, 2023).

148 ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicators by SDG: 5.6.2- Number of countries with laws and regulations that guarantee full and equal access to women and men aged 15 years and older to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education", database. Available at: https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 4 June 2024).

subregion between 2019 and 2021,[149] potentially due to the disruption of services during the COVID-19 pandemic. RMNCH coverage inequalities are found to favour richer households, those with secondary or higher education, and those living in urban areas — with those in the poorest quintile, with no education and living in rural areas lagging starkly behind.[150] SRH services covered in the UHC package are usually limited to maternal health, and to a lesser extent family planning, largely excluding other critical services such as safe abortion, post-abortion care, prevention and treatment of gender-based violence and fertility care.[151]

Underlying the low coverage of SRH services is insufficient funding and service capacity. Estimates show that by increasing the public spending on SRH services package from the current level of US$4.80 per person per year to US$10.60 per person annually in low and middle-income countries would decrease unintended pregnancies by 68 per cent, unsafe abortions by 72 per cent and maternal deaths by 62 per cent and increase women's participation in the labour market and girls' participation in schooling. To achieve this, Southern Asia is one of the two regions around the worlds (second to Sub-Saharan Africa) that would require the largest boost in total investment.[152] Insufficient funding has multifaceted implications. In the Asia-Pacific region, healthcare personnel, including SRH service personnel, remains inadequate. For instance, despite an increase in the region's nursing and midwifery personnel density (SDG 3.c.1) from 29.1 per 10,000 population in 2018 to 32.7 in 2020, South and South-West Asia continues to be challenged by a rather low density at 17.3 per 10,000 population in 2020.[153] The lack of technical capacity to provide comprehensive and quality SRH services, including treatments for persons living with HIV, also remains a challenge, especially for community-level SRH service providers. The lack of trained healthcare providers and inadequate technical capacity in healthcare systems are significant barriers to delivering quality SRH services, particularly in low-resource settings.[154]

Moreover, the lack of inclusion of important SRH stakeholders (e.g., CSOs representing women, youth, women with disabilities, older women in all their diversity) also affect the priority setting processes as well as service delivery. CSOs are vital for the implementation and dissemination of SRH guidelines, combating misinformation, and holding stakeholders accountable for delivering SRH services.[155]

Gender norms and structural barriers are key contributors to low access and uptake of SRH services. The lack of body autonomy, gender stereotypes and stigma undermine women and girls' agency to make decisions and choices over their own bodies and health, and subsequently their uptake of services, particularly among adolescents, young people and key populations.[156] Restrictions in women's mobility, educational attainment and access to economic resources are among the reasons for those with unmet health service needs, including SRH service needs, to forgo care.[157] Among the 16 Asia-Pacific countries and territories with data available in the SDG era, the share of women aged 15 to 49 who make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use and reproductive healthcare (SDG 5.6.1) varies from 27.2 per cent in Tajikistan to 82.4 per cent in Georgia.[158] In 29 countries and territories with data, 12 countries perform under the global average when it comes to the extent to which national laws and regulations guarantee full and equal access to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education (SDG 5.6.2).[159] Moreover, restrictive laws and policies, including those that restrict SRH and reproductive rights of certain groups such as women and girls with disabilities, remain in some countries in the region.[160] Addressing gender norms, stigma and discrimination in relevant laws and the SRH service provision systems remains a pressing issue to be addressed. The following sections will examine three service components that are important to SRH services, namely maternal and newborn health, family planning, and HIV and sexually transmitted infections.

149 ESCAP, "Gender equality and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights in Asia and the Pacific", ESCAP/APPC(7)/INF/3 (Bangkok, 2023). WHO measures RMNCH sub-index of coverage index of essential health services (SDG 3.8.1) by the weighted average of eight indicators in four stages along the continuum of care: reproductive health (such as demand for family planning satisfied with modern methods); maternal health (such as antenatal care coverage with at least one visit and skilled attendance at birth); child immunization (such as BCG, measles and DTP3 immunization coverage); and management of childhood illnesses (such as oral rehydration therapy for diarrhea and care seeking for suspected pneumonia).

150 Ibid.

151 WHO, "Investing in sexual and productive health and rights: essential elements of universal health coverage", technical brief (Geneva, 2023).

152 Sully EA, Biddlecombe A, Darroch JE, Riley T, Ashford LS, Lince-Deroche N and others, "Adding It Up: Investing in Sexual and Reproductive Health 2019", *Guttmacher Institute* (2020).

153 ESCAP SDG Gateway. "Indicators by SDG 3.c.1- Health work density and distribution", database. Available at: https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 4 June 2024).

154 United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), *State of World Population Report* (New York, 2019).

155 World Health Organization, *Consolidated Guideline on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Women Living with HIV* (Geneva, 2017).

156 Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), *The path that ends AIDS: UNAIDS Global AIDS Update 2023* (Geneva, 2023*)*. Key populations refer to gay/bisexual and other men who have sex with men, people in prisons and other closed settings, people who inject drugs, sex workers and transgender persons.

157 WHO and World Bank, *Tracking Universal Health Coverage: 2023 Global Monitoring Report* (Geneva, 2023).

158 ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicators by SDG: 5.6.1- Proportion of women aged 15-49 years who make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use and reproductive health care", database. Available at: https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 4 June 2024).

159 ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicators by SDG: 5.6.2- the number of countries with laws and regulations that guarantee full and equal access to women and men aged 15 years and older to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education", database. Available at: https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 4 June 2024).

160 WHO and World Bank, *Tracking Universal Health Coverage: 2023 Global Monitoring Report* (Geneva, 2023).

FIGURE 2.7 **Change in maternal mortality deaths per 100,000 live births, 2000–2020**
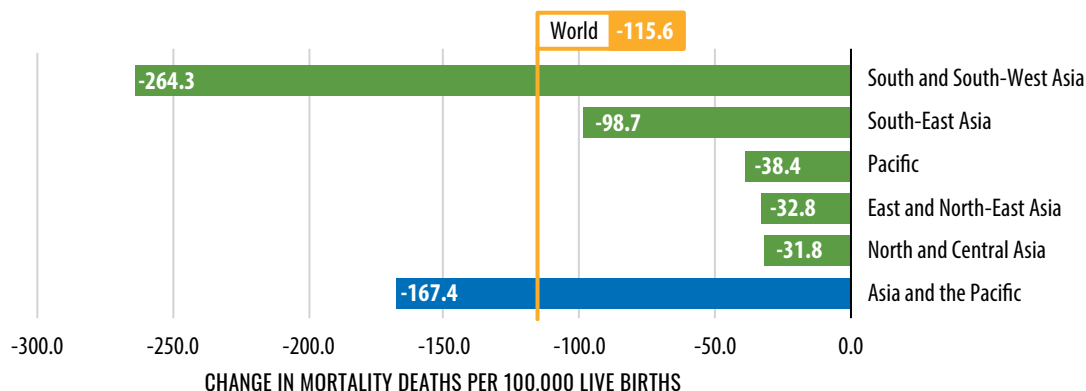
Region	Value
World	-115.6
South and South-West Asia	-264.3
South-East Asia	-98.7
Pacific	-38.4
East and North-East Asia	-32.8
North and Central Asia	-31.8
Asia and the Pacific	-167.4

CHANGE IN MORTALITY DEATHS PER 100,000 LIVE BIRTHS

Source: ESCAP elaboration based on data from ESCAP SDG Gateway Asia Pacific, "Indicators by SDG: 3.1.1 – Maternal mortality", database. Available at: https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 25 March 2024).

2.4.1 Maternal and newborn health

Maternal mortality in the region has declined by a third since 2000, with most reductions occurring between 2000 and 2015 and little decline thereafter.[161] In 23 out of 45 countries in the region for which data are available, maternal mortality ratios fell by at least one half between 2000 and 2020. In 12 of these countries, maternal mortality declined by two thirds. Most progress was made prior to 2015. A few countries experienced an increase between 2015 and 2020. Despite noticeable declines in maternal mortality, many countries, mostly in South-East Asia, South and South-West Asia and the Pacific, still experienced maternal mortality ratios between 100–299 per 100,000 live births in 2020.[162] It is important to acknowledge that South and South-West Asia and South-East Asia are the two subregions that have achieved the biggest improvement in maternal mortality ratio since 2000 (Figure 2.7). While the region is heading in the right direction, it must accelerate actions to reduce maternal mortality further. At the current rate of progress, the region is set to remain far from achieving the Sustainable Development Goal target 3.1 of less than 70 per 100,000 live births by 2030.[163]

The region has made substantial progress in reducing neonatal mortality. SDG 3.2 aims for every country to reach a neonatal mortality rate of below 12 deaths per 1,000 live births by 2030. In 2021, the following subregions had achieved or were close to

this level: East and North-East Asia, South-East Asia, North and Central Asia and the Pacific. In South and South-West Asia, the rate was estimated at 22 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2021. Of the 51 countries in the Asia-Pacific region for which data are available, 32 countries have already achieved the SDG target of 12 deaths per 1,000 live births by 2030. Some 26 countries have at least halved their neonatal mortality rate in recent years, and 11 countries have reduced it by at least two thirds.[164] A number of countries have taken proactive actions. For example, **Lao People's Democratic Republic** has been implementing the National Strategy and Action Plan for Integrated Services on Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health (2021-2025), with support from the World Health Organization, including building the capacity of provincial and district hospitals to provide Early Essential Newborn Care (EENC) and Kangaroo Mother Care (KMC).[165] In **Papua New Guinea**, the WHO rolled out a television and radio drama called *It Takes a Village* aiming to drive for social and behavioural change for maternal and newborn health. The Ministry of Health convened a ministerial-level task force on maternal and newborn health to advise the Government on actions to address high rates of maternal and newborn mortality.[166] **India** significantly reduced newborn mortality by scaling up the Special Newborn Care Units to enable better access to emergency services and obstetric care, coupled with efforts to encourage intuitional delivery. The Government works with UNICEF on community-based social and behavioural change

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161 WHO, Trends in maternal mortality 2000 to 2020: estimates by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group and UNDESA/Population Division (Geneva, 2023).

162 ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicators by SDG: 3.1.1- Maternal mortality ratio", database. Available at: https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 04 June 2024).

163 ESCAP, "Gender equality and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights in Asia and the Pacific", ESCAP/APPC(7)/INF/3 (Bangkok, 2023).

164 Ibid.

165 WHO, "Safeguarding maternal, newborn and child health", web page. Available at: https://www.who.int/laos/our-work/safeguarding-maternal--newborn-and-child-health (accessed on 2 August 2024).

166 WHO, "'It takes a village' to reduce maternal and newborn mortality in Papua New Guinea", blog. Available at https://www.who.int/westernpacific/news-room/feature-stories/item/it-takes-a-village--to-reduce-maternal-and-newborn-mortality-in-papua-new-guinea (accessed on 2 August 2024) and WHO, "Minister pledges to reduce high maternal and newborn mortality", press release. Available at: https://www.who.int/papuanewguinea/news/detail/28-02-2019-minister-pledges-to-reduce-high-maternal-and-newborn-mortality (accessed on 02 August 2024).

initiatives to address the widespread son preference which contributes to the higher infant and under-five mortality of girls than boys.[167] In **Pakistan**, the National Assembly adopted a resolution in 2018 to recognize the rights of every child and mothers and ensure the provision of the best available early care, especially in the first thousand days of every child. The Government also works with UNICEF to roll out newborn survival and immunization campaigns.[168] These are significant achievements, and lessons learned could be used to assist other countries in reducing neonatal mortality.

Maternal and perinatal mortality largely results from inadequate or poor-quality care during pregnancy, childbirth or after birth, with persistent gaps in access for disadvantaged women and girls. SDG indicator 3.1.2 of skilled birth attendance is generally used to capture maternal and newborn health-care utilization. In the Asia-Pacific region, skilled birth attendance was nearly universal except for South and South-West Asia, where it was estimated at 89.4 per cent in 2021 (Figure 2.8).[169] Yet, the regional averages often mask inequalities in access. In most countries, the gaps between the furthest behind and

the furthest ahead persist, though they are declining. Women and adolescent girls who are poorer, less educated and give birth to two or more children are much less likely to have access to professional help during childbirth.[170]

Inequalities in access to quality maternal and newborn health care services are found to disproportionately affect adolescent girls and young mothers, mothers and newborns in rural, ethnic minorities and other vulnerable communities. This is often due to geographical isolation, lack of transportation means, and limited availability of local healthcare facilities and trained personnel.[171] The lack of access contributes to higher rates of maternal mortality. Addressing the need for targeted interventions and policy support for more effective delivery of healthcare services in these underserved communities are essential.[172] Meanwhile, maternal and child health care for particularly vulnerable groups, such as adolescent and young mothers, should be combined with other benefits and service programmes to address multidimensional vulnerabilities in order to achieve tangible and sustainable results for women and girls.

FIGURE 2.8 **Percentage of births attended by skilled health personnel, 2000 and 2022 (or latest available year)**
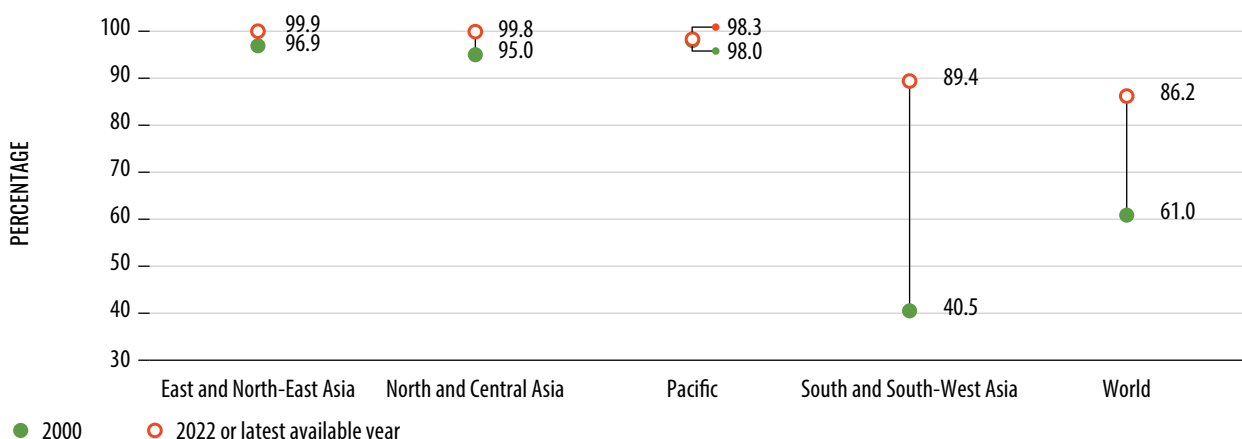
Source: ESCAP elaboration based on ESCAP SDG Gateway Asia Pacific, "Indicators by SDG: 3.1.2 – Births attended by skilled health personnel", database. Available at https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 25 March 2024). The subregional aggregate for South and South-West Asia is as of 2021, and as of 2016 for East and North-East Asia, as of 2020 for North and Central Asia, as of 2019 for the Pacific, and as of 2022 for the world aggregate. Subregional aggregate for South-East Asia is not available due to inadequate data points but the average rates are available for Cambodia (2010, 2014, 2022); Indonesia (2012, 2017); Lao People's Democratic Republic (2011, 2017); Myanmar (2016); the Philippines (2013, 2017, 2022); Thailand (2012, 2015, 1029, 2022); and Viet Nam (2010, 2013, 2021). Among these countries, Thailand (100 per cent) Cambodia (99 per cent), Viet Nam (97 per cent) and Indonesia (92 per cent) have achieved universal or near-universal skilled birth attendance. The Philippines and Lao People's Democratic Republic have made substantial progress but remain under the world average rate. Nonetheless, substantial gaps remain between the furthest behind and the furthest ahead groups based on household wealth, educational attainment and the number of children in most countries, especially in Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, the Philippines and Viet Nam. See ESCAP Leaving No One Behind portal. Available at: https://lnob.unescap.org/ (accessed on 28 May 2024).

167   UNICEF, "Newborn and child health: Let's end preventable neonatal deaths and ensure Every Child Alive". Programme web page. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/india/what-we-do/newborn-and-child-health (accessed on 2 August 2024).

168   UNICEF, "Every child survives and thrives- Health: Country programme of cooperation between the government of Pakistan and UNICEF 2018-2022", programme report (Islamabad, 2019).

169   ESCAP, "Gender equality and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights in Asia and the Pacific", ESCAP/APPC(7)/INF/3 (Bangkok, 2023).

170   ESCAP, "Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) Platform", database. Available at: https://lnob.unescap.org/ (accessed on 2 August 2024).

171   WHO, *Ending Preventable Maternal Mortality (EPMM): A Renewed Focus for Improving Maternal and Newborn Health and Well-Being* (Geneva, 2021).

172   Asia Pacific Alliance for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (APA), "Gender, Sexuality, and SRHR Factsheet APFSD 2021", blog, 2021. Available at: https://www.asiapacificalliance.org/our-publications/gender-sexuality-and-srhr-factsheet-apfsd-2021 (accessed on 2 August 2024).

BOX 2.3   Building maternal and perinatal death surveillance and response systems

The maternal and perinatal death surveillance and response (MPDSR) process involves the routine identification and timely notification of all maternal and perinatal deaths, the review of these deaths, the implementation of actions based on recommendations from the death reviews, and the monitoring of actions taken. The primary goal of MPDSR is to reduce future preventable maternal mortality through a continuous surveillance and action cycle. It also helps enhance the quality of maternal and newborn programmes, as well as routine data systems such as Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) and routine health information systems (RHIS).[1] Findings from a 2021 UNFPA study reveal that 13[2] out of the 17 surveyed countries in Asia and the Pacific use the full MPDSR system. Among the 13 countries, 7[3] implement the system throughout the whole country, and the rest implement it across some districts or divisions. A few countries, such as Cambodia, Iran (the Islamic Republic of), Sri Lanka and Viet Nam, reported the use of the full MPDSR system in the entire country for more than five years. Despite functioning, these systems often fall short of optimal performance due to delays in the MPDSR response component.[4]

Some countries have made significant strides in advancing MPDSR systems in recent years. For example, in **Nepal**, the MPDSR system was expanded to 77 hospitals and 11 districts in 2019. The collected information is reviewed, analysed and monitored at the national level by the Family Welfare Division of the Department of Health Services. Importantly, the division's decision to make every maternal death reporting mandatory from all health facilities and local levels has enabled a data-driven approach to saving the lives of mother and children.[5] In **Timor-Leste**, the Ministry of Health incorporated "perinatal death surveillance and response" into the existing maternal death surveillance and response system in 2019. Capacity-development training was delivered to national health professionals, the MPDSR guidelines were launched, and the National MPDSR Committee was re-activated in 2023 with new leadership appointed.[6]

MPDSR, when adequately funded and appropriately implemented, ensures that the progress made in eliminating maternal and perinatal deaths will not be reversed by major disruptions to health systems. To this end, continued investment in and support for building robust MPDSR systems are needed.[7] Moreover, integrating MPDSR within broader quality of care (QoC) efforts for maternal and newborn health has the potential to strengthen the follow-up, implementation and monitoring of responses as part of the MPDSR process.[8]

1   WHO, "Maternal and Perinatal Death Surveillance and Response", web page. Available at https://www.who.int/teams/maternal-newborn-child-adolescent-health-and-ageing/maternal-health/maternal-and-perinatal-death-surveillance-and-response (accessed on 5 June 2024).

2   Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam.

3   Bhutan, Cambodia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Mongolia, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka and Viet Nam.

4   UNFPA Asia Pacific Regional Office, *Counting What Matters: Maternal and Perinatal Death Surveillance and Response Systems in Asia-Pacific during the COVID-19 Pandemic 2020-2021* (Bangkok, 2022).

5   United Nations Nepal, "Mandatory reporting to save lives of mothers during COVID-19 pandemic and beyond", web page, 06 September 2023. Available at https://nepal.un.org/en/244822-mandatory-reporting-save-lives-mothers-during-covid-19-pandemic-and-beyond (accessed on 5 June 2024).

6   UNICEF, "The Maternal and Perinatal Death Surveillance and Response (MPDSR) workshop, talking points delivered by Ainhoa Jaureguibeitia, OIC Representative of UNICEF in Timor-Leste", note. Available at https://www.unicef.org/timorleste/media/5746/file/14%20July%202023__UNICEF%20Dep%20Rep%20Speech%20-%20Workshop%20on%20preliminary%20result%20of%20the%20MPDSR%20survey%202022-2021.pdf (accessed on 5 June 2024).

7   UNFPA Asia Pacific Regional Office, *Counting What Matters: Maternal and Perinatal Death Surveillance and Response Systems in Asia-Pacific during the COVID-19 Pandemic 2020-2021* (Bangkok, 2022).

8   WHO, Implementation of Maternal and Perinatal Death Surveillance and Response as Part of Quality of Care Efforts for Maternal and Newborn Health: Considerations for Synergy and Alignment (Geneva, 2021).

2.4.2 Family planning

While significant progress has been made in meeting women's family planning needs, progress across subregions is uneven. Unmet need for family planning refers to the percentage of women of reproductive age who want to stop or delay childbearing but are not using any method of contraception.[173] The measure shows the gap between women's reproductive intentions and their contraceptive behaviour and helps track progress toward achieving universal access to reproductive health. A total of 16 per cent of married women in Asia and 19 per cent in Oceania had unmet need for modern methods in 2023.[174] Unmet need for modern methods ranged from 10 per cent in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia to 30 per cent in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand). Unmet need for modern methods declined in Asia between 2000 to 2023 from 16.4 to 15.3 per cent. In Oceania, unmet need stagnated over the same period. Central and Southern Asia has achieved the largest reduction in unmet need for modern methods since 2000 (from 24 to 19 per cent). By 2030, unmet need for modern methods is projected to be 15 per cent in Asia and 18 per cent in Oceania. Progress toward increasing the extent to which demand is satisfied with modern methods (SDG 3.7.1) has been uneven (Figure 2.9), with Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) projected to continue to lag behind, if not mitigated. A range of countries in the region have adopted policies or action plans to provide universal access to family planning services, including **Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam.**[175]

While barriers to accessing health services, including SRH services, exist in all countries; inequalities exist within countries. SRH service provision often overlooks the SRH needs among young women, adolescents, older women, women with disabilities and individuals with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities due to misconceptions, stereotypes and the absence of relevant service information in accessible formats and languages and of accessible service provision.[176] Barriers to accessing health services are also more commonly experienced by disadvantaged population sub-groups such as the poorest, least educated, those living in rural areas, and those living in communities where women and girls have to get permission to go for treatment or where taboos exit and stand in the way of women and girls receiving health services from non-female service providers.[177]

Young women and adolescent girls are more likely to have unmet need for family planning with modern methods, resulting in high risks of unintended pregnancy and unsafe abortion. While positive change in use of modern contraceptive methods has been most significant among women aged between 15 and 24, gaps remain the greatest for this age group, especially for those aged between 15 and 19 — a prevailing pattern across all regions.[178]

FIGURE 2.9 **Demand for family planning satisfied by any modern method, by SDG region, 2000, 2010, 2015, 2020, 2023 and 2030**
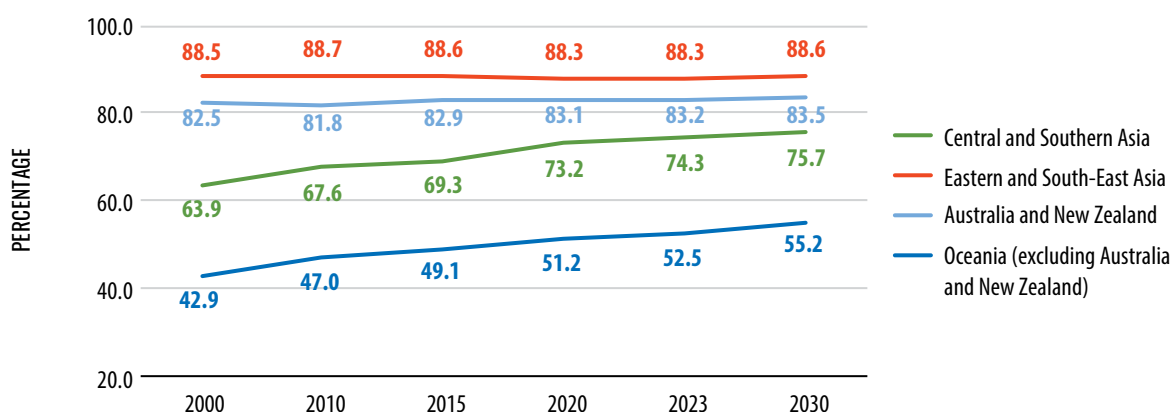
Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Contraceptive Use 2022 and Estimates and Projections of Family Planning Indicators 2022 (New York, 2022). See ESCAP, "Gender equality and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights in Asia and the Pacific", ESCAP/APPC(7)/INF/3 (Bangkok, 2023).

173 United Nations, "World Contraceptive Use 2022 and Estimates and Projections of Family Planning Indicators 2022", methodology report", UN DESA/POP/2022/DC/NO. 5 (New York, 2022).

174 ESCAP, "Gender equality and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights in Asia and the Pacific", ESCAP/APPC(7)/INF/3 (Bangkok, 2023).

175 OECD, "SIGI 2024 Regional Report for Southeast Asia: Time to Care", Social Institutions and Gender Index (Paris, 2024).

176 ESCAP (2018), *Building disability-inclusive societies in Asia and the Pacific: Assessing progress of the Incheon Strategy.* Available at: https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/SDD%20BDIS%20report%20A4%20v14-5-E.pdf (accessed 24 January 2024).

177 WHO and World Bank (2023). Tracking universal health coverage: 2023 global monitoring report. Geneva: World Health Organization and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

178 Ibid.

Among all countries with available data in the ESCAP region, only five countries perform equally well or better than the global average against the measure of meeting family planning demand with modern methods for women of reproductive ages (15–49) (Figure 2.10). Among adolescent girls aged 15 to 19, significantly fewer (as compared to women aged 20 to 49) have their family planning needs met with modern or traditional methods (Figure 2.11). For young women and adolescent girls, the limited access to SRH services, including family planning, increases the risk of unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions. Each year, there are over 3.7 million births to adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 in Asia and the Pacific. Maternal mortality rates and the total number of maternal deaths among adolescent girls are the highest in the Pacific, followed by South Asia.[179] It is estimated that 65 per cent of all unintended pregnancies in Asia and 38 per cent in the Pacific end up in induced abortion, and there are about 3.6 million unsafe abortions each year among women aged 15 to 24 years in Asia (excluding East Asia).[180] The negative health consequences and associated stigmas keep many from school and employment and increase significantly their likelihood of living in poverty.

FIGURE 2.10 **Percentage of women aged 15 to 49 whose demand for family planning is satisfied with modern methods, by country, latest year available**
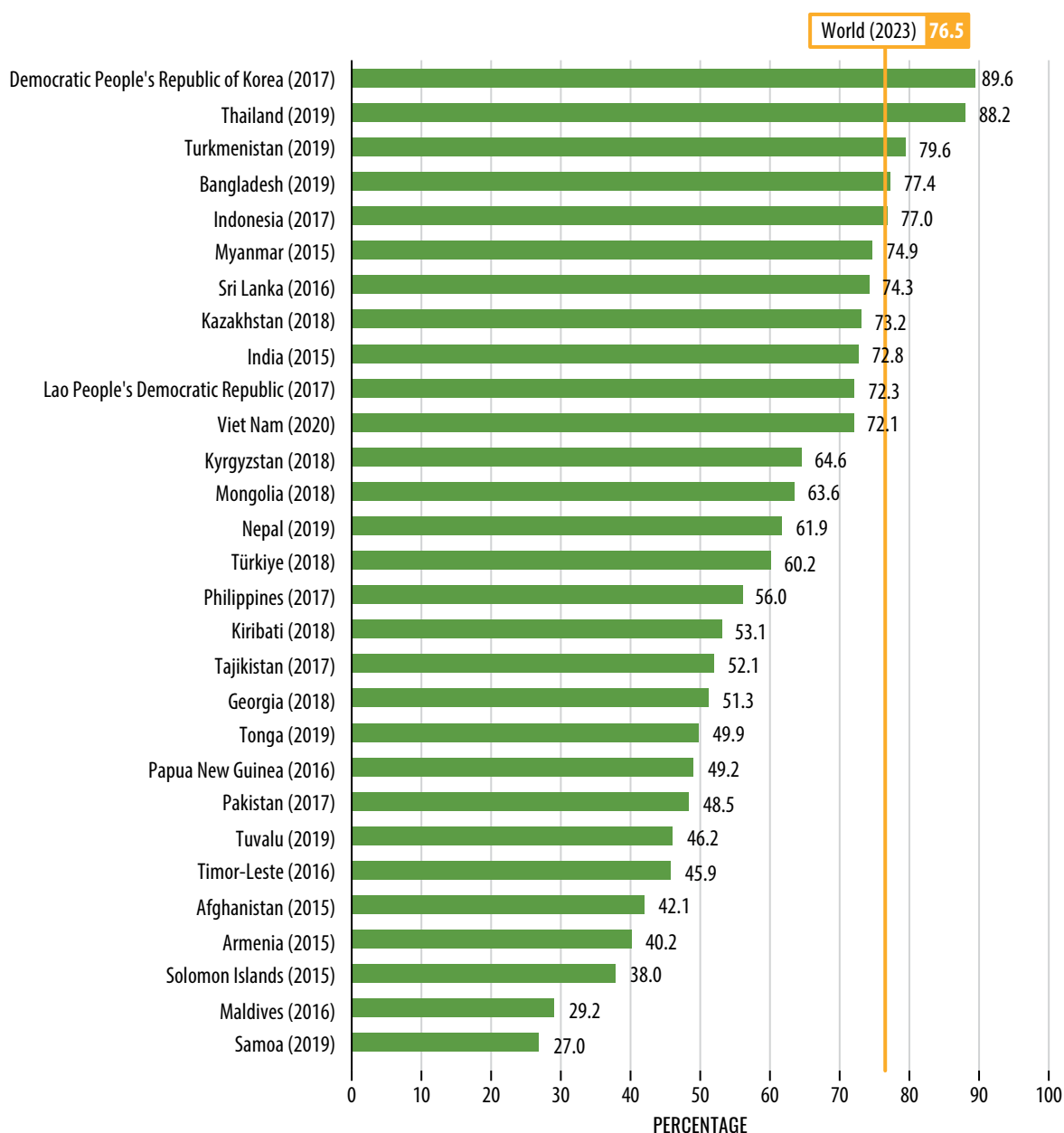
Source: ESCAP SDG Gateway Asia Pacific, "Indicators by SDG: 3.7.1 – Family planning satisfied with modern methods", database. Available at https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 25 March 2024).

179 See Annex 2 regional groupings by UNFPA.
180 UNFPA (2021). Understanding and addressing adolescent pregnancy. UNFPA, Bangkok.

FIGURE 2.11 Percentage of women of reproductive age whose demand for family planning is satisfied with modern and traditional methods, by age group, latest available year
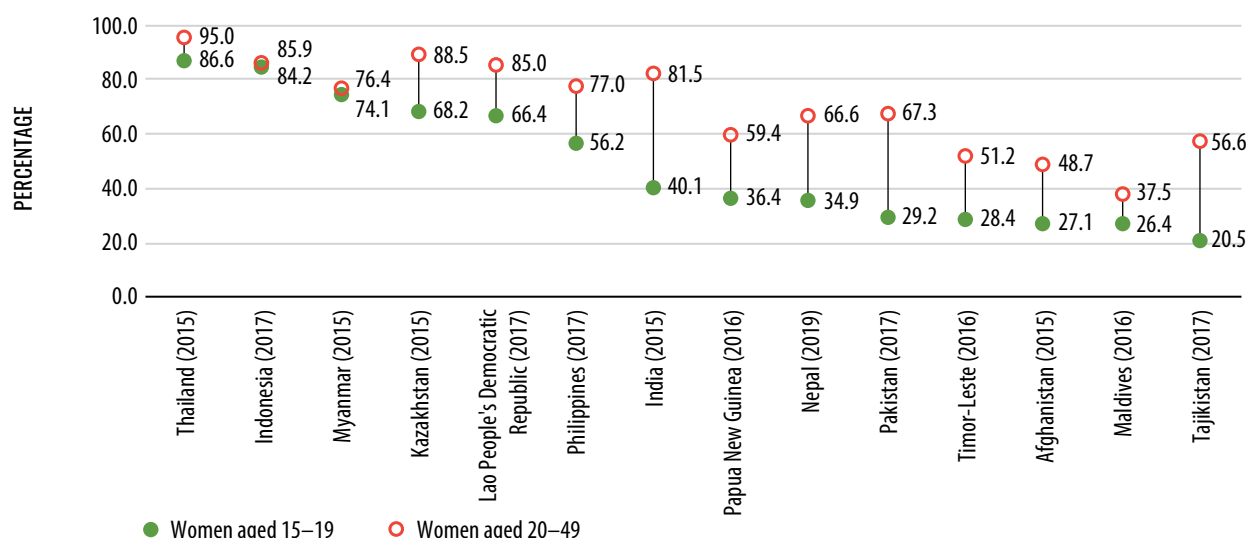
Source: ESCAP SDG Gateway Asia Pacific, "Indicators by SDG: 3.7.1 – Family planning satisfied with modern methods", database. Available at: https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 25 March 2024).

FIGURE 2.12 Adolescent fertility rate (live births per 1,000 women aged 15–19), 2000, 2010, 2015, 2020, 2023, 2030 and 2050
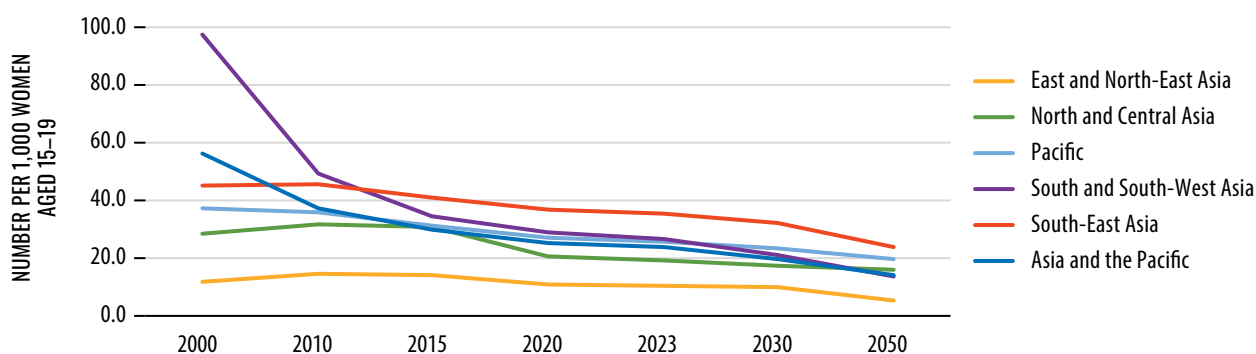
Source: ESCAP elaboration based on United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Population Prospects 2022, Online Edition (New York, 2022). See ESCAP, "Gender equality and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights in Asia and the Pacific", ESCAP/APPC(7)/INF/3 (Bangkok, 2023).

Adolescent fertility on average is lower in Asia and the Pacific as compared to the world average; yet, it continues to affect many adolescent girls, especially in South-East Asia. In the Asia-Pacific region, adolescent fertility is estimated at 23.5 live births per 1,000 women (aged 15–19) in 2023, compared to 41.0 live births globally.[181] The region has experienced a steady decline in adolescent fertility from 56.1 live births per 1,000 women (aged 15–19) in 2000. Most of the decline in the region's adolescent fertility took place between 2000 and 2015. The pace of decline has since slowed or stagnated, especially in East and North-East Asia and South-East Asia. The rates also vary considerably across subregions and countries in the region. South-East Asia has the highest adolescent

fertility level in the region (35.2) and is projected to continue to have the highest rates in 2030 and 2050 despite declines. The most remarkable decline since 2000 took place in South and South-West Asia, by 63 percentage points between 2000 and 2015 and a slower further decline of 8 percentage points between 2015 and 2023 (Figure 2.12). Adolescent fertility rates are higher in rural than in urban areas, and among girls with no education than those with more than secondary education.[182] High adolescent fertility rates are often an outcome of unmet family planning needs and have broad linkages to limited education, early marriage, inequalities of opportunity and gender inequalities.[183]

181 ESCAP, "Gender equality and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights in Asia and the Pacific", ESCAP/APPC(7)/INF/3 (Bangkok, 2023).
182 Ibid.
183 ESCAP, *Asia-Pacific Population and Development Report 2023* (United Nations publication, 2023).

> **BOX 2.4** **Reducing adolescent fertility in Lao People's Democratic Republic**
>
> Concerningly high rates of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy are observed in Lao People's Democratic Republic. According to data from the Lao Social Indicator Survey III-2023, 30.5 per cent of women aged 20–24 years were first married or in union before the age of 18, and 17.4 per cent had a live birth before the age of 18.[1] Among women aged 20–24 years who gave birth before age 18, two-thirds were married or in union by the time of pregnancy, while more than one-fourth were not. Adolescent girls' experiences of sex behaviours and pregnancy are often influenced by their inadequate knowledge about sexual and reproductive health, power imbalance with their partners, and a lack of agency over decisions around if and when to have sex, use contraceptives and whether to continue the pregnancy. Some parents, community members and adolescent girls in the country tend to view child marriage and early union as a socially acceptable alternative to education or work and the most acceptable resolution to a pregnancy outside of marriage or union.[2]
>
> The Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic has adopted the Noi 2030 Framework, a holistic approach to safeguarding adolescent girls from early pregnancies and integrating their needs into national SDGs implementation plans. This approach highlights the significance of a multi-dimensional response to adolescent pregnancy, stressing prevention, education and support services.[3] With support from UNFPA, efforts have been made to empower adolescents in addressing child marriage and adolescent pregnancy, including the integration of comprehensive sexuality education curricula at all educational levels, as well as the provision of sexual health information and services; mental health and psychosocial support; and protection services for survivors and victims of gender-based violence.[4] In 2023, the Government reiterated its commitment to ending all harmful practices faced by adolescent girls in line with the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action at the National Conference on Population and Development, the first-ever high-level conference on population and development in the country.[5]
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>
> 1 Lao People's Democratic Republic, Statistics Bureau, *Lao Social Indicator Survey 2023 – Key Indicators Report* (Vientiane, 2024).
> 2 UNFPA and UNICEF, *Understanding Pathways to Adolescent Pregnancy in Southeast Asia: Findings from Lao PDR* (Bangkok, 2023).
> 3 UNICEF, "Government, UNFPA and UNICEF launch groundbreaking report on adolescent pregnancy in Lao PDR", press release, 4 April 2024. Available at https://www.unicef.org/laos/press-releases/government-unfpa-and-unicef-launch-groundbreaking-report-adolescent-pregnancy-lao (accessed on 6 June 2024).
> 4 UNFPA and UNICEF, *Understanding Pathways to Adolescent Pregnancy in Southeast Asia: Findings from Lao PDR* (Bangkok, 2023).
> 5 UNFPA, "First-ever multi-sectoral pledge on population and development in Lao PDR reached at the National Conference on Population and Development", press release, 26 October 2023. Available at https://lao.unfpa.org/en/news/first-ever-multi-sectoral-pledge-population-and-development-lao-pdr-reached-national-conference (accessed on 6 June 2024).

2.4.3 HIV and sexually transmitted infections[184]

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs), if untreated, lead to various reproductive health issues including preterm births, low birth weight babies, ectopic pregnancies, pelvic inflammatory disease and infertility, and increase the risk of HIV transmission. For a pregnant woman, untreated infectious syphilis can lead to congenital syphilis, resulting in serious outcomes for her baby, including death. Sexual health education and access to testing and treatment services, including within the domain of maternal and perinatal services, are important interventions to prevent and address STIs.

The Human Papillomavirus (HPV) infection is one of the most common STIs and causes a range of conditions in men and women, including precancerous lesions and causes 99 per cent of cervical cancer at a later stage.[185] Despite the availability of HPV vaccines and knowledge to prevent cervical cancer, globally every two minutes a woman dies of cervical cancer, with 90 per cent of these deaths occurring in low- and middle-income countries.[186] There is also significant regional difference in cervical cancer incidence and mortality rates. One in five cervical cancer cases and one in four cervical cancer deaths in 2022 worldwide occurred in South Asia.[187] Regional differences are often associated with inequalities in access to HPV vaccines, screening and treatment services,

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184 Unless otherwise specified, the regional definitions in this section follow the UNAIDS definitions. See Annex 2 for ESCAP members and associate members covered in Asia and the Pacific Eastern Europe and Central Asia and UNAIDS, *The path that ends AIDS: UNAIDS Global AIDS Update 2023* (Geneva, 2023*)*.
185 Kehinde Sharafadeen Okunade, "Human papillomavirus and cervical cancer", *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology,* vol. 40 (July 2020).
186 See UNICEF, "Wave of new commitments marks historic step towards the elimination of cervical cancer", press release, 05 March 2024. Available at https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/wave-new-commitments-marks-historic-step-towards-elimination-cervical-cancer (accessed 16 August 2024).
187 UNICEF (2024). HPV+ Technical Note for South Asia (draft) and WHO, "Global Cancer Observatory", web page. Available at: https://gco.iarc.fr/en (accessed on 2 August 2024).

risk factors including HIV prevalence, social and economic determinants such as sex, gender biases and poverty. The WHO recommends that the primary targets of HPV vaccination are girls aged 9 to 14 years, the age group where vaccination can have the biggest impact. [188] Yet, adolescent girls in South Asia, who account for nearly one third of the world's adolescent girls, face significant barriers in access to HPV vaccination. Out-of-school girls are most likely to be left out as HPV vaccination campaigns are often implemented in schools. The currently low HPV vaccination rates in South Asia are caused by barriers in both supply and demand sides. On the supply side, there exists an overall lack of prioritization of HPV vaccination in national immunization programmes and lack of vaccine availability in many countries. On the demand side, social and cultural norms rooted in patriarchy and local religious contexts often limit adolescent girls' autonomy and decision making, as well as health literacy of girls and their parents. Stigma and myths about the impact of HPV vaccines, as well as economic barriers, prevent a significant proportion of adolescent girls in the subregion, especially those living in urban slums, poor households in remote areas and other underserved communities from accessing HPV vaccination. [189] Addressing such gaps require incorporation of HPV vaccination in national immunization programmes, training of female health workers who can deliver adolescent-friendly and gender-sensitive vaccination services, health education to remove myth and misconception about HPV vaccination, and addressing economic barriers and gender norms that impede access and uptake.

In Asia and the Pacific, the numbers of new HIV infections and HIV-related deaths have declined overall since 2010, though some countries have experienced an increase in recent years. [190] In this region, the HIV epidemic disproportionately affects key populations, [191] especially young people (aged 15–24 years), and their sexual partners who accounted for about a quarter of the region's new HIV infections in 2022. Although access to combined HIV prevention services and treatment, including harm reduction

services, self-testing and virtual interventions, along with greater provision of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and antiretroviral therapy in some countries, significant gaps remain in prevention service and treatment coverage, particularly among young people among key populations. Stigma and discrimination – be it cultural, social and institutional — against persons living with HIV and persons from key populations continue to be the main reasons for barriers that prevent access to and uptake of testing and treatment. [192] Eastern Europe and Central Asia [193] is one of the two regions where new infections among women and girls aged 15 years and older had increased between 2021 and 2022. [194] Sexual transmission is the primary channel of HIV infections, followed by shared drug injection and vertical transmission. [195] Other sexually transmitted infections are highly prevalent in the region. [196] Globally, evidence from some countries indicate that new infections rose during the COVID-19 pandemic due to interruption of prevention, testing and treatment services for STIs. [197]

The entrenched inequalities in access to sexual and reproductive health services in Asia and the Pacific could be ascribed to insufficient integration of comprehensive SRH services in health benefit packages and primary health care, both of which are essential to achieving universal health coverage; insufficient funding, healthcare workforce and technical capacity to provide comprehensive, gender-sensitive and age-friendly SRH services; gender norms as well as economic and cultural barriers that restrict the access and uptake of services by women and girls and the most vulnerable populations; poor participation of other SRH stakeholders; and often, the lack of robust and disaggregated SRH data. [198]

The region's health systems and the healthcare workforce were overstretched during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to major interruption to essential health services. In particular, progress in RMNCH outcomes in South-East Asia [199] has slowed or even worsened for the first time in decades, as a result of

188 WHO, *Human Papillomavirus Vaccines: WHO Position Paper* (Geneva, 2022).

189 UNICEF (2024). HPV+ Technical Note for South Asia (draft).

190 Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines and Timor-Leste experienced an increase in the numbers of new HIV infections in 2022.

191 UNAIDS, *The path that ends AIDS: UNAIDS Global AIDS Update 2023* (Geneva, 2023*).* Key populations are gay/bisexual and other men who have sex with men, people in prisons and other closed settings, people who inject drugs, sex workers and transgender persons.

192 Ibid.

193 Nine out of 16 countries covered in this region are ESCAP member States.

194 United Nations, "Women, the girl child and HIV and AIDS, Report of the Secretary-General", E/CN.6/2024/6 (New York, 2024). New infections among women and girls aged 15 and above increased in the Middle East and North Africa and in Eastern Europe and Central Asia by 7.0 per cent and 2.1 per cent, respectively.

195 ESCAP elaboration based on UNAIDS, *UNAIDS Global AIDS Update 2022* (Geneva, 2022).

196 ESCAP, "Gender equality and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights in Asia and the Pacific", ESCAP/APPC(7)/INF/3 (Bangkok, 2023).

197 WHO, "WHO releases new guidance to improve testing and diagnosis of sexually transmitted infections", news, 24 July 2023. Available at: https://www.who.int/news/item/24-07-2023-who-releases-new-guidance-to-improve-testing-and-diagnosis-of-sexually-transmitted-infections (accessed on 2 August 2024).

198 WHO, *Critical Considerations and Actions for Achieving Universal Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health in the Context of Universal Health Coverage through a Primary Health Care Approach* (Geneva, 2022).

199 See Annex 2 for regional groupings by WHO.

service disruption.[200] Vulnerable populations have been the worst impacted. Given the protracted emergencies in some countries in the region, there is an urgent need for countries to strengthen the resilience of their health systems. Some countries in the region (such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Japan, Republic of Korea, Mongolia, Singapore, Thailand)[201] leveraged digital health technologies such as telemedicine and real-time dashboards from the Health Management Information System (HMIS) to ensure the continuity of essential health services during the pandemic. Such promising practices should be further explored and applied in various emergency contexts.

Advancing universal health coverage, including comprehensive SRH services, requires a combination of political commitment and well-defined, gender-responsive, age-friendly and inclusive strategies for accelerated progress.

2.5 QUALITY EDUCATION AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Education attainment and skills development is a key dimension of multidimensional poverty while access to education and skills is also an important means of breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Education not only prepares people for jobs; it also provides people with knowledge and life skills that are crucial for healthy, responsible and sustainable living throughout the life cycle. On the other hand, skills development through lifelong learning are equally essential, especially for those outside the formal general or vocational education systems. In the context of population ageing, climate change and digital transformation, enabling people, especially those already left behind, to equip themselves with the skills requisite to meet the shifting demand in the labour market is now of increasing importance. Gender parity in access to quality education, skills development and training not only gives women and girls equal opportunity to participate in the labour market and the society and is associated with health outcomes for women and girls as well as their families; it also brings about positive returns on economic growth and societal development.

2.5.1 Quality school education

In Asia and the Pacific, major progress has been achieved in overall education attainment for both women and men across the region; but inequalities remain across countries. The share of the total population aged 20 to 24 who have not obtained secondary education or above has nearly halved in the ESCAP region over the past 20 years.[202] Countries in Central and Southern Asia have made significant progress towards improving both lower and upper secondary completion rates but still lag behind other regions in Asia and the Pacific; in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand), a reversing trend has been observed in the completion rates of both levels.[203] The mean years of schooling for people aged 25 years and older are projected to increase in all countries of the region in the coming decades.[204] Nonetheless, the overall progress has masked inequalities across countries. In 14 countries, the mean years of schooling are projected to remain below 10 years until 2040.[205]

Gender matters in determining educational attainment but the dynamic varies across countries, age groups and levels of education. When enrolled in school, girls outperform or perform equally well as boys in school completion across primary, lower-secondary and upper-secondary levels in all Asia-Pacific countries with data with a few exceptions (Figure 2.13). However, that is not the entire story. ESCAP analysis before the COVID-19 pandemic shed further light on the roles of household wealth and gender in educational attainment. Among the 30 countries with data on completion of secondary education, being poor (living in the poorest 40 per cent of households) is the defining characteristic of the furthest behind population group in almost all countries.

For people aged 20–35 years, poor women are left furthest behind in 15 countries while poor men in nine countries are left furthest behind. This picture changes significantly for the age group of 35 years and older, with poor women being the furthest left behind in most (21) countries compared to poor men in only four countries. For completion of tertiary education among people aged 25–35 years, gender (in addition to being poor) matters in 22 countries with women left behind in 11 countries (mostly in

200 United Nations, "The sustainable development goals progress report: 2022", report (New York, 2022) ; Clara Calvert and others, "Maternal mortality in the Covid-19 pandemic: Findings from a rapid systematic review", *Global Health Action*, 14 (sup1) (October 2021); Barbara Chmielewska and others, "Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on maternal and perinatal outcomes: a systematic review and meta-analysis", *Lancet Glob Health*, 9 (6) (June 2021).

201 Cornelius Kalenzi, "Contextualizing Transformation of Healthcare Sector in Asia-Pacific in the Post-COVID-19 Era", ESCAP working paper series (Bangkok, 2020).

202 ESCAP, "Review of progress made towards the implementation of the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Population and Development, as well as of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the key actions for its further implementation in Asia and the Pacific", note by the Secretariat, ESCAP/APPC(7)/2/Rev.1 (Bangkok, 2023).

203 UN DESA, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special edition – Towards a rescue plan for people and planet* (New York, 2023). See Annex 1 for regional groupings by the United Nations Statistics Division in monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals.

204 ESCAP, *Asia-Pacific Population and Development Report 2023* (United Nations publication, 2023).

205 These 14 countries include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Bhutan, Cambodia, Myanmar, Nepal, Solomon Islands, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Maldives, India, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Viet Nam. See Figure 5.1 in ESCAP, *Asia-Pacific Population and Development Report 2023* (United Nations publication, 2023).

FIGURE 2.13 Gender gap in school completion rate, by educational level
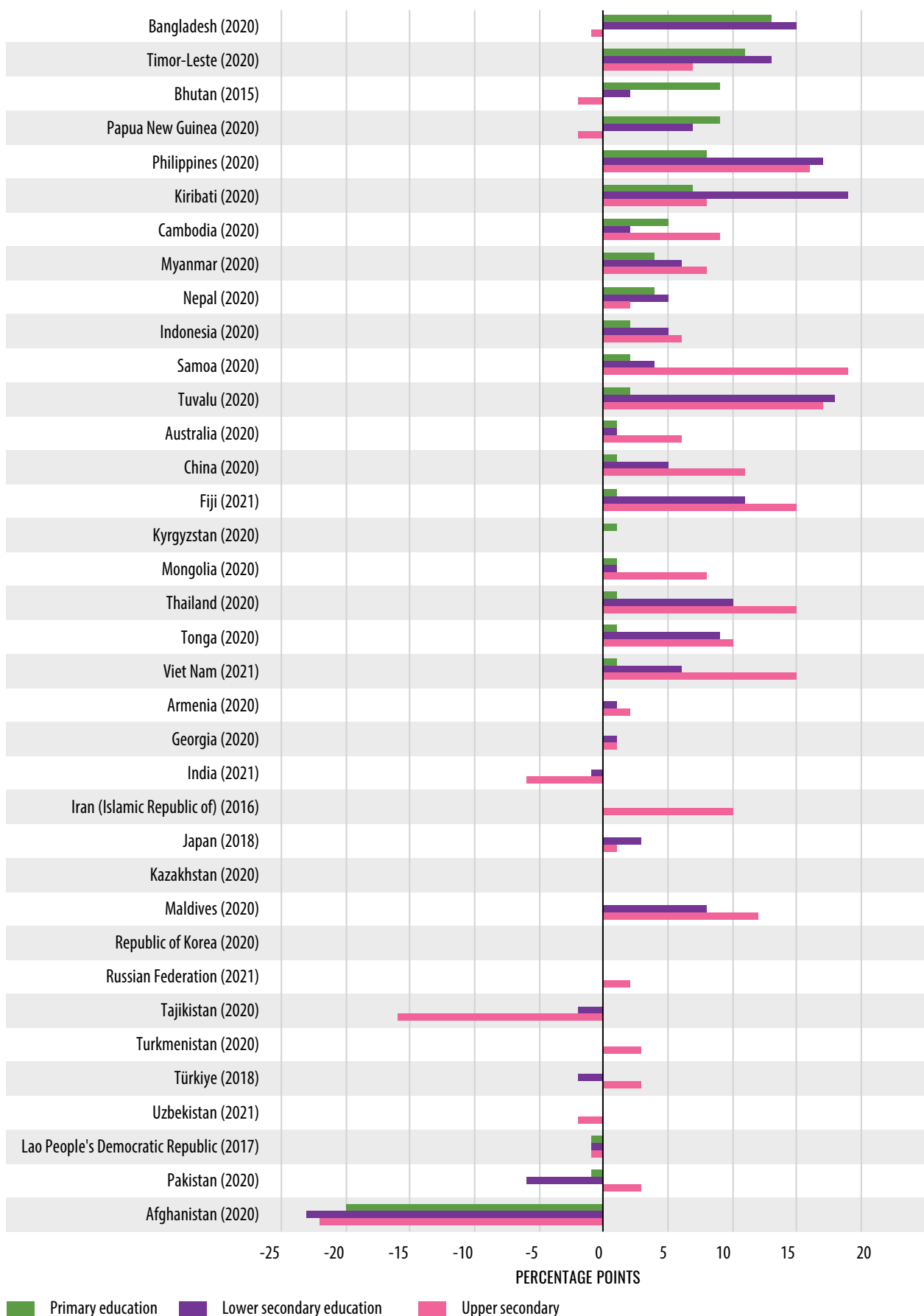
Primary education   Lower secondary education   Upper secondary

Source: ESCAP elaboration based on data from ESCAP SDG Gateway Asia Pacific, "Indicators by SDG: 4.1.2 – Completion rate by educational level", database. Available at https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 25 March 2024). The gender gap refers to the difference in school completion rates between girls and boys of relevant age groups, i.e., percentage of girls completing education minus percentage of boys completing education.

South and South-West Asia) and men left behind in the other 11 countries (spreading across South-East Asia, North and Central Asia and the Pacific).[206]

The foundational learning crisis persists. In half of all Asia-Pacific countries, less than 50 per cent of students in primary and lower secondary education master basic literacy and numeracy foundational skills. Recent data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicate that from 2018 to 2022, there is an overall downward trend of 15-years old students meeting the basic proficiency level in mathematics and reading, on average, in PISA-participating education systems in the region. The "learning poverty" was particularly concerning in low- and middle-income countries in South Asia, where the share of children not acquiring basic proficiency in literacy by age 10 was estimated at 78 per cent in 2022. Learning poverty was estimated to rise from 60 per cent in 2019 to 78 per cent in 2022 among low- and middle-income countries in South Asia, and to rise from 35 per cent to 45 per cent in East Asia and the Pacific over the same period.[207] As basic literacy and numeracy are essential building blocks to all learning, knowledge and skills, the foundational learning crisis is compromising learning outcomes as children progress to higher levels of education.[208]

Girls tend to outperform boys academically. Girls in Asia and the Pacific achieve higher levels of attainment in mathematics and reading across all levels of education, which is consistent with the global trend.[209] **However, unequal access to emerging learning tools (e.g., digital or remote learning platforms) may change the picture in the long run, unless mitigated.** A small-scale assessment from rural districts in Pakistan suggested that the reading gender gap reversed between 2019 and 2021 from favouring girls to favouring boys, potentially due to gender inequality in access to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.[210]

One of the main reasons of the foundational learning crisis is related to the far from universal access to early childhood education. Gross enrolment ratio in pre-primary education is only 61 per cent in Central and Southern Asia, 68 per cent in South-Eastern Asia and 63 per cent in Oceania,[211] leaving behind the girls and boys from the poorest wealth quintile, children with disabilities and the other most disadvantaged children. Low education attainment (no education or with only primary or secondary education) of the mother (in 15 out of 26 countries) more often defines the furthest left behind group of children than being poor (in 13 out of 26 countries).[212] The pre-primary education systems do not always deliver on its potential to tackle gender inequities and address harmful gender stereotypes while they are being absorbed by the youngest learners.[213]

The urgency of addressing the foundational learning crisis has not been widely recognized. Only a very few countries of Asia-Pacific have signed the Commitment to Action on Foundational Learning,[214] launched at the United Nations Secretary-General's Transforming Education Summit (TES) in September 2022, followed up by the G20 meeting in 2023. The G20 New Delhi Leader's Declaration as well as the related Education Ministers' conference recognized the importance of foundational learning as the primary building block for education and employment.[215]

Still, many girls remain out of schooling and the COVID-19 pandemic may worsen inequality in education. Globally, the out-of-school population of primary and secondary school age declined by 9 million from 2015 to 244 million girls and boys in 2021.[216] Gender norms and biases that carry implications for the distribution of resources and unpaid care and domestic work burden within the household often play a key role in girls' schooling. While the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is to be further studied, current evidence suggests no visible increase in out-of-school rates except for at the upper-secondary level in countries with relevant data. The Philippines and India reported the largest increase and the largest decrease in their out-of-school population, respectively, during the pandemic period. Across education levels, gender parity has been achieved in education enrolment in Asia and

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206 ESCAP LNOB Platform analysis based on MICS and DHS data on secondary education completion for people aged 20–35 years and for people aged 35 years and older from 30 countries. ESCAP, "Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) Platform", database. Available at: https://lnob.unescap.org/ (accessed on 2 August 2024). See Annex 2 for subregional groupings follow the definition by ESCAP.

207 World Bank and others, *The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update* (Washington, D.C, 2022).

208 Ibid.; World Bank, "Learning Poverty Global Database: Historical data and sub-components", database. Available at: https://datacatalog.worldbank.org/search/dataset/0038947 (accessed on 2 August 2024); World Bank, *Fixing the Foundation: Teachers and Basic Education in East Asia and Pacific* (Washington, D.C, 2023).

209 SESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicators by SDG: 4.5.1- Parity indices (female/male, rural/urban, bottom/top wealth quintile and others such as disability status, indigenous peoples and conflict-affected, as data become available) for all education indicators on this list that can be disaggregated", database. Available at: https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 04 June 2024).

210 UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report Summary 2023: Technology in education: A tool on whose terms?* (Paris, 2023).

211 Ibid.

212 ESCAP LNOB Platform analysis based on MICS and DHS data between 2010 and 2022 on early childhood education from 26 countries. ESCAP, "Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) Platform", database. Available at: https://lnob.unescap.org/ (accessed on 2 August 2024).

213 UNICEF, *Tackling Gender Inequality from the Early Years: Strategies for Building a Gender-transformative Pre-primary Education System*, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti (Florence, 2022).

214 UNICEF, "Commitment to Action on Foundational Learning", web page. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/learning-crisis/commitment-action-foundational-learning (accessed on 2 August 2024).

215 India, National Council of Educational Research and Training, *Foundational Literacy and Numeracy in G20: Higher Secondary Stage* (New Delhi, 2024).

216 UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report Summary 2023: Technology in education: A tool on whose terms?* (Paris, 2023).

the Pacific.[217] However, aggregate levels could mask higher levels of gender disparity in some countries and large numbers of girls remaining out of school. Since September 2021, Afghan girls have been banned from schooling beyond the sixth grade, affecting at least 1.1 million secondary school girls. The subsequent suspension of university education for women affected some 100,000 students. Globally, the number of girls and young women out of school was estimated at 129 million.[218] Moreover, women and girls with disabilities are particularly less likely to enrol in and complete education, regardless of levels, according to data from 14 Asia-Pacific countries and territories.[219] Dismantling legal, social and financial barriers to girls and women accessing education remains an urgent imperative, including in early childhood education, which is not yet free or mandatory in many Asia-Pacific countries, and in lifelong learning, if the world aims to achieve SDG 4.

The Asia-Pacific region has been significantly underinvesting in education. While the Incheon commitment sets benchmarks to allocate at least 15 to 20 per cent of total public expenditure on education,[220] few countries in the region have met the 20 per cent benchmark and only several have met the less ambitious 15 per cent benchmark. The public expenditure on education has been dropping and was magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic. East Asia and the Pacific recorded a stark drop in education expenditure from 15.3 per cent of the total public expenditure in 2019 to 12.8 per cent in 2020. It had recovered to only 13.7 per cent in 2021. In South Asia, there has been a consistent declining trend, from 14 per cent in 2016 to 10.2 per cent in 2021.[221] In addition, public spending on education is not sufficiently prioritizing foundational skills. For instance, Asia-Pacific countries are not implementing the Tashkent recommendation[222] of allocating at least 10 per cent of the public education budget for early childhood education. The share of public education expenditure allocated to primary education is lower than in other regions which leads to unequitable spending: children from the poorest quintile benefit significantly less than their wealthier peers from public education spending.[223]

The availability of menstrual health support in schools has a profound impact on girls' access to quality education.[224] The lack of menstrual hygiene facilities, stigma and stress about menstruation that affect girls from a young age, reduce their time spent in school. It can even lead to girls dropping out of school, as well as increasing their likelihood of falling behind in learning.[225] In South Asia, many girls report missing one to three school days per month during their period.[226] Universal coverage of basic water, sanitation and hygiene facilities in schools is an essential foundation for menstrual health of adolescent girls. As of 2023, The coverage of basic water services in schools is not universal, except in Australia and New Zealand. The coverage rate is as low as 51 per cent in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand). Some 24 per cent of schools in Central and Southern Asia and 49 per cent of schools in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) lack single-sex and usable (available, functional and private) sanitation facilities. The availability of single-sex sanitation facilities is more common in lower and upper secondary schools than in primary schools in all countries and territories. In Central and Southern Asia where more disaggregated data are available, the coverage rate is higher in urban schools than in rural schools by 12 percentage points.[227]

Universal coverage of basic hygiene services (handwashing facilities with water and soap) in schools has been achieved in a number of Asia-Pacific countries such as **Australia, Azerbaijan, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Thailand, Türkiye and Turkmenistan**. Among the rest of countries, only Bangladesh and Cambodia are on track to achieve universal coverage by 2030. The coverage rate has dropped by two percentage points in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) since 2015 and remained below the world average in Central and Southern Asia as of 2023. Menstrual health education is provided in 2 out of 5 schools (39 per cent) in Central and Southern Asia (74 per cent data coverage) while the provision is much higher in Fiji (90 per cent), Solomon Islands (73 per cent) and the Philippines (72 per cent). The Philippines, among the small number of countries with data, provides

217 Ibid.

218 Ibid.

219 ESCAP, *Disability at a Glance 2021: The Shaping of Disability-inclusive Employment in Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2021).

220 UNESCO, *Education 2023: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action Towards Inclusive and Equitable Education and Lifelong Learning for All* (Paris, 2016).

221 World Bank, "World Development Indicators, Government expenditure on education, total (% of government expenditures)". Available at: https://databank. worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&series=SE.XPD.TOTL.GB.ZS&country=EAS&_gl=1*1ng1byj*_gcl_au*NzUwOTYzOTg5LjE3MjA2MjlxMzY (accessed on 21 August 2024).

222 UNESCO, 16 November 2022. Tashkent Declaration and Commitments to Action for Transforming Early Childhood Care and Education. Available at: unesdoc. unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000384045/PDF/384045eng.pdf.multi.

223 UNICEF, "Transforming education with equitable financing". Brief (New York, 2023). Available at: https://www.unicef.org/media/133431/file/Transforming%20 Education%20with%20Equitable%20Financing.pdf (accessed 15 July 2024).

224 See Annex 2 for regional groupings by the United Nations Statistics Division in monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals.

225 WHO and UNICEF, *Progress on Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools 2015-2023: Special focus on menstrual health* (New York, 2024).

226 UNICEF, *Rewriting the Narrative for the Second Decade with and for Adolescent Girls* (Katmandu, 2022).

227 WHO and UNICEF, *Progress on Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools 2015-2023: Special focus on menstrual health* (New York, 2024).

menstrual sanitation materials for girls in 87 per cent of schools. Several countries in the region have made commendable efforts to improve menstrual health for schoolgirls by incorporating menstrual health in school improvement plans (the Philippines) and budget allocation to schools (Fiji, Indonesia, Nepal and the Philippines) but implementation efficiency of such policies and budgets are being challenged by the lack of accountability and unclear responsibilities among line ministries.[228]

School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) is another key factor hindering gender equality in access to quality education. SRGBV usually involves acts or threats of physical, sexual or psychological abuse that occurs in and around school. Rooted in persisting gender norms and stereotypes, SRGBV creates an unsafe environment for girls and boys in schools and is detrimental to educational experiences and academic achievement of children and young people. Across the globe, an estimated 246 million girls and boys experience SRGBV every year.[229] Yet data and statistics on the issue remain rare. Girls are disproportionately affected, and the risks are even higher among adolescent girls, girls with disabilities, those who are from other marginalized groups, such as religious minorities and indigenous groups, as well as students of diverse sexual orientation and gender identities.[230] Children and young people who have experienced SRGBV are at higher risks of anxiety, depression, fear, stress, low self-esteem and even self-harm intention or behaviours.[231]

The stress and trauma associated with SRGBV can impair concentration, reduce school participation and hinder overall academic achievement.[232] Studies in Australia, Japan and Hong Kong, China found that students reported higher stress levels to the academic study when they were bullied in school.[233] The negative impacts of SGBV go beyond the individual level. Violence in and around school has an estimated economic cost of approximately US$ 11 trillion in lost lifetime earnings for the labour force.[234] Governments, education actors, students, parents, family members and community members

all have important roles to play in a "whole school approach" to address SRGBV by regularly collecting data on SRGBV, putting it at the heart of national education systems and policies and foster cultural and behavioural changes. Some countries in the region recently amended laws to strengthen prevention and response to SRGBV (such as **China** on sexual harassment in schools).[235] In particular, youth and survivor activists and youth-led organizations play a critical role in preventing, mitigating and responding to SRGBV (such as **Bangladesh, the Philippines and Viet Nam**).[236]

The persisting gender biases that keep many women and girls away from STEM education requires transformation. These are stereotypes and expectations that perceive women and girls as less suitable and capable in STEM subjects. Data from APEC economies indicate that low levels of participation of women and girls in tertiary STEM studies prevail even in high income countries like the Republic of Korea and Japan.[237] Addressing underrepresentation of women and girls in STEM fields needs to consider generational trends and equity gaps among women and girls. Some countries like China have implemented deliberate programmes to encourage women and girls' participation in STEM, with tailored interventions for schoolgirls living in less resourced and remote communities and affirmative measures to enable women to overcome career planning and development barriers in STEM sectors.[238] Gender biases and discrimination prevail in STEM related studies, research and jobs as well as the design and algorithm of big data and emerging technologies like generative AI, which are designed in a male-centred fashion. Unless such biases and gender gaps in education and participation in STEM are transformed, technological advancement will reinforce and increase inequalities rather than transforming the lives of women and girls for the better. The presence of women leaders and data scientists is essential to prevent women and other groups in vulnerable situations being marginalized in digital and technological transformations and their outcomes.

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228 WHO and UNICEF, *Progress on Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools 2015-2023: Special focus on menstrual health* (New York, 2024).

229 UNESCO and UN-Women, *Global Guidance on School-Related Gender-based Violence* (Paris and New York, 2016).

230 Safe to Learn, "School-related gender-based violence: achieving systemic, sustainable change – with youth and for youth", brief (London, 2023).

231 UNICEF, *A Familiar Face: Violence in the Lives of Children and Adolescents* (New York, 2017).

232 Perkins, S. and Graham-Bermann, S, "Violence Exposure and the Development of School-Related Functioning: Mental Health, Neurocognition, and Learning", *Aggression and violent behavior*, vol. 17, *No.* 1 (January 2012).

233 Lai, S. L., Ye, R. and Chang, K. P, "Bullying in middle schools: An Asian-Pacific regional study", *Asia Pacific Education Review*, vol. 9, pages. 503-515 (December 2008).

234 World Bank, *Ending Violence in Schools: An Investment Case - Selected Findings* (Washington, D.C., 2021).

235 China, Ministry of Justice, "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women", web page. Available at http://en.moj.gov.cn/2023-12/15/c_948362.htm (accessed on 2 August 2024).

236 Safe to Learn, "School-related gender-based violence: achieving systemic, sustainable change – with youth and for youth", brief (London, 2023).

237 OECD, *The Role of Education and Skills in Bridging the Digital Gender Divide: Evidence from APEC Economies* (Paris, 2019).

238 China, National Working Committee on Children and Women under the State Council, *National report of the Beijing+30 review* (Beijing, 2024). Available at https://www.asiapacificgender.org/node/244.

BOX 2.5 **Increasing the participation of women and girls in STEM education and careers in Australia**

The Government of Australia is making concerted efforts to advance gender equality in STEM education and careers. At the request of the Government, the Australian Academy of Science, in collaboration with the Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering, developed the Women in STEM Decadal Plan in 2019. This plan offers a framework aimed at bringing about transformative, systematic and sustained improvements in Australia's STEM sector. It delineates six opportunity areas, including leadership and cohesion, evaluation, workplace culture, visibility, education and industry action, for stakeholders from government, academia, industry, the education sector and the broader community to act and drive change.[1]

The Government released the Advancing Women in STEM Strategy in 2019 and the 2020 Action Plan, outlining a national coordinated approach to building a society that provides equal opportunity for people of all genders to learn, work and engage in STEM. Three action areas are identified, including enabling STEM potential through education, supporting women in STEM careers, and making women in STEM visible. By 2030, the Government is committed to ensuring that: (1) Australia's education system, from early education to tertiary, supports the active inclusion of girls and women and enables them to explore their full STEM potential; (2) STEM workplaces support the active recruitment and retention of women in STEM roles at all levels; and (3) girls and women see STEM education and careers as visible and interesting paths and understand the opportunities offered by STEM for their futures.[2]

Following a data-driven approach, the Government has created the STEM Equity Monitor, a national data resource on the current state and trends regarding women and girls' participation in STEM. The 2023 monitor indicates positive progress in achieving gender equality in STEM education and careers. For example, the number of women enrolling in university STEM courses increased by 31 per cent between 2015 and 2021, and the number of women in STEM-qualified occupations increased by 68 per cent from 2012 to 2022. However, further efforts are needed to close the gender gap in STEM. Women accounted for only 37 per cent of enrolments in university STEM courses and held only 15 per cent of STEM-qualified jobs. Girls' confidence in STEM subjects was generally lower than that of boys and decreased as they grew older. In 2022, the gender pay gap in STEM industries was 17 per cent in favour of men. Moreover, only 23 per cent of senior management and 8 per cent of chief executive officers in STEM-qualified industries were women.[3] The Government commissioned an independent review of its programmes to improve diversity in the STEM sector. Findings and recommendations from the review, released in 2024, provide a roadmap for enhancing government Women in STEM initiatives, such as a Women in STEM Ambassador, the Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) initiative, Women in STEM and Entrepreneurship Grants, and a Girls in STEM Toolkit (GiST).[4]

1   Australian Academy of Science, *Women in STEM Decadal Plan, Australian Academy of Science* (Canberra, 2019).
2   Australia, Department of Industry, Science and Resources, *The Advancing Women in STEM Strategy and the 2020 Action Plan* (n.p., 2019).
3   Australia, Department of Industry, Science and Resources, "The state of STEM gender equity in 2023", web page. Available at https://www.industry.gov.au/news/state-stem-gender-equity-2023 (accessed on 10 June 2024).
4   Australia, Department of Industry, Science and Resources, *Pathway to Diversity in STEM Review: Final Recommendations* (Canberra, 2024).

2.5.2 Evolving skills development

In addition to general education, skills development is of increasing importance amidst main transitions including the green and just transition associated with climate change, the digital transition and rapid population ageing. Skills development, as part of Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs),[239] has also been found instrumental to supporting women into self-employment, particularly in entrepreneurship.[240]

The skills portfolios of women and girls need to transform to enable access to formal, green and decent jobs which is highly relevant to developing countries in Asia and the Pacific where informality and underemployment prevail in the job market. The digital and green transitions present new opportunities for women's economic empowerment. They provide more formal, greener and decent jobs with higher incomes, social protection and a safer work environment. Yet, a prerequisite for materializing such opportunities is matching women and girls' skills portfolio to evolving labour market demand. In the Asia-Pacific region, women are overrepresented in low-skilled occupations and informal jobs across economic sectors. Digital technologies are accelerating a premature deindustrialization[241] in developing countries, which is likely to disproportionally impact low and medium-skilled workers. The sectors that will be most affected by the green and just transition employ about 52 per cent of the workforce. These sectors are agriculture, forestry and fishing; mining and quarrying; manufacturing; electricity gas, steam and air conditioning supply; water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities; constructions, and transportation and storage.[242] Women are at risk of losing jobs they already have in some of these sectors and missing out new job opportunities created in the digital and green transition process, unless they are reskilled or upskilled (See more discussion in Chapter 3).

The increasing use of ICT in many sectors and occupations requires strong investment in supporting women and girls to keep up with digital connectivity and skills, especially at the higher levels. In Asia and the Pacific, 63 per cent of the female population use the internet compared to 69 per cent of the male population. Wide gaps remain in internet usage between rural and urban areas, at 52 per cent and 80 per cent, respectively. Some 75 per cent of the region's population own a mobile phone. While 42 per cent of the population are covered by 5G network, mobile networks remain out of reach for many people, especially those in least developed countries (LDCs) and land-locked developing countries (LLDCs).[243] ESCAP analysis shows that individuals living in the poorest 40 per cent of households and less educated (having no or only primary or secondary education) are often the furthest left behind in mobile phone ownership and in internet usage.[244] In Tonga, being a woman also defines the furthest left behind in mobile phone ownership while in Samoa, Papua New Guinea and the Maldives, it defines the furthest left behind in internet usage. Data from seven countries in Southeast Asia indicate that the gender gap is more evident when it comes to more advanced digital skills. In Singapore, for example, only 4 women for every 10 men can write a computer program.[245] Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) systems and curricula need to be modernized to meet modern labour market demands, and give priority to the training and re-skilling of women, young people, people with a lower level of education, and those at more risk of being excluded in the job market such as older persons and persons with disabilities. Such investment would enable populations of the region to tackle digital exclusion.

In line with the ILO Convention 204, Governments in the region need to use all policy instruments to progressively support the transition of the large share of informal workers into formal, green and decent jobs, guided by the principle of equality and non-discrimination. Nonetheless, most countries spend very little on training and re-skilling schemes despite the large share of low-skilled workers in the region, particularly among women workers in the South Asia region.[246] Expanding the quantity of training schemes and the quality of skills curricula, in combination with a higher quality of general education, should be a priority for countries to help their populations keep up with the ongoing mega transitions. Equally important is addressing inequalities in education and skills development through intentional, gender-responsive and inclusive measures.

239 Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs) target the population seeking jobs and those at risk of losing jobs. They often include supply-side measures such as training, re-skilling and job-matching and wage subsidies and public works as demand-side measures.

240 ESCAP, *The Workforce We Need: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific 2022* (United Nations publication, 2022).

241 Deindustrialization refers to the reduction of manufacturing within an economy which result in a shrinking share of workers employed in the manufacturing industries. When occurring in developing economies which remain dependant on industrialization, it could lead to large numbers of unemployment and lower levels of income. Dani Rodrik, "Premature deindustrialization", *Journal of Economic Growth*, vol. 21 (November 2015).

242 ESCAP, The Workforce We Need: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific 2022 (United Nations publication,2022).

243 ITU, *Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2023* (Geneva, 2023).

244 ESCAP LNOB Platform analysis based on MICS and DHS data from 24 countries on mobile phone ownership by individuals between 2016 and 2022 and on internet usage between 2015 and 2022. Available at: https://lnob.unescap.org/overview-results?indicator=404&geo=all&year=all (accessed on 29 May 2024).

245 UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report, Southeast Asia: Technology in Education: A tool on Whose Terms? (*Paris, 2023).

246 ESCAP, *The Workforce We Need: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific 2022* (United Nations publication, 2022).

BOX 2.6   Reskilling and upskilling disadvantaged youth and adults through public-private partnership in the digital age in Thailand

The swift transition towards emerging technologies and the digital economy in Thailand necessitates that youth and adults upskill or reskill to meet new labour market demands. The Thailand Digital Economy and Society Development Plan emphasizes the importance of accumulating human capital by equipping every group of workers with appropriate knowledge and skills in preparation for a life and career in the digital age. Youth and adults most at risk of being excluded in the digital economy urgently need opportunities and assistance to acquire essential skills for pursuing their careers and lifelong learning goals in the digital era. Findings from the first large-scale assessment of foundational skills among youth and adults in Thailand indicate that 74.1 per cent of the assessed population underperformed in foundational digital skills. A high level of deficiency in these skills was observed among young women and men without a tertiary education.[1] The limited data available suggest women's participation in the digital economy and STEM education is restricted.[2]

Against this background, led by Microsoft Thailand, a public-private partnership for the initiative "Accelerating Thailand" was formed to equip underprivileged or unemployed groups with digital and other job skills in line with the demands of the fast-evolving labour market. This initiative involved seven organizations, namely the Digital Economy Promotion Agency, the Department of Skill Development of the Ministry of Labour, the Office of the Non-Formal and Informal Education of the Ministry of Education, the Thailand Professional Qualification Institute, Jobs DB Recruitment (Thailand) Ltd., the Thai Fund Foundation, and UNESCO Bangkok.[3]

Supported by the initiative, Thai youth and adults participated in skills development courses at community learning centres or learned through partner agencies' online platforms. The online curricula in digital skills for employment purposes comprised six main courses, ranging from digital literacy and Microsoft application software training to more advanced content, such as mobile application development and data analytics. Learners who successfully completed the courses received a recognized skills certificate and were assisted in reaching out to employment platforms. Further training in essential and complementary employment techniques, such as preparing job applications and mastering effective interviewing skills, was provided. More than 100,000 non-formal education[4] learners, 66 per cent of whom were women, received training through community learning centres, and nearly 180,000 learners reported having participated in online courses. Among the learners at community learning centres, over 80,000 reported increased learning opportunities, while more than 14,000 indicated that they had experienced personal and family development. Some 4,500 further developed their current profession; another 4,500 gained extra-income; and 1,900 started a new career.[5]

The achievements of the initiative underscore the need and benefits of fostering public-private partnerships to strengthen digital literacy and essential job skills with universally recognized certification. This approach can effectively provide disadvantaged youth and adults with multiple employability pathways and ongoing self-development throughout their lives, contributing to their empowerment in the digital age.

1   World Bank, *Fostering Foundational Skills in Thailand: From A Skills Crisis to A Learning Society* (Washington, D.C., 2024).

2   UNESCO, "UNESCO Bangkok fosters greater awareness of persistent gender divide in digital information literacy in Asia-Pacific", web page. Available at https://thailand.un.org/en/215771-unesco-bangkok-fosters-greater-awareness-persistent-gender-divide-digital-information#:~:text=In%20 Thailand%20itself%20in%202020,digital%20economy%20and%20STEM%20education (accessed on 10 June 2024).

3   United Nations Thailand, "Enhancing lifelong learning opportunities for underprivileged Thai youth and adults during the COVID-19 pandemic", story, 8 November 2021. Available at https://thailand.un.org/en/157660-enhancing-lifelong-learning-opportunities-underprivileged-thai-youth-and-adults-during-covid (accessed on 10 June 2024).

4   Like formal education, non-formal education is institutionalized, intentional and planned by an education provider. The defining characteristic of non-formal education is that it is an addition, alternative and/or a complement to formal education within the process of the lifelong learning of individuals. UNESCO, "Non-formal education", glossary. Available at: https://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/non-formal-education (accessed on 2 August 2024).

5   Microsoft, "Microsoft surpasses target milestone in 'Accelerating Thailand' digital skills program with 280,000 workers empowered in 2021", blog, 4 April 2022. Available at https://news.microsoft.com/th-th/2022/04/04/accelerating-thailand-phase2-en/ (accessed on 10 June 2024).

A young woman from a fishing community in West Bengal in eastern India. © UN-Women/Anindit Roy Chowdhury

2.6 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Women and girls, especially those who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, are particularly subject to multidimensional poverty. Ameliorating poverty experienced by women and girls and ensuring their right to an adequate standard of living depend on effective policies and targeted programmes to address persistent inequalities in access to public services that meet multidimensional needs, in particular, social protection, health care, education and skills development. Such policies and programmes will have positive effects on employment and decent work, meet care needs, support women's and girls' mobility and access to schools, markets and work[247] and mitigate gender-based violence.[248] Furthermore, spending on gender-responsive social protection, health, education and skills development will lead to positive returns in a country's accumulation and quality of human capital which are essential assets for sustainable development and growth.

Moreover, the trajectory of poverty is increasingly affected by megatrends such as demographic shifts, climate change and digitalization. Addressing it thus requires forward-looking economic and social policies with the vision to address evolving inequalities and prevent people from falling back into poverty traps.

To this end, ESCAP member States and other stakeholders are encouraged to take actions set out below.

✚ Systematically collect and use disaggregated data and gender statistics. This will enable more effective multidimensional poverty assessments at the national and subnational level. It will support the monitoring and evaluation of poverty reduction programmes to inform targeted policy and programme design, as well as the assessment of policy and programme effectiveness in leaving no one behind.

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247 United Nations Review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, Report of the Secretary-General", E/CN.6/2020/3 (New York, 2022).
248 WHO, *RESPECT Women: Preventing Violence against Women* (Geneva, 2019).

✚ Incorporate strategies to address gender dynamics and inequalities related to poverty in its multiple and overlapping dimensions into national poverty reduction strategies. Depending on national contexts, national poverty reduction strategies may account for relative poverty.

✚ Invest, develop and implement comprehensive gender-responsive social protection measures, including contributory and non-contributory schemes and programmes to cover the full life cycle. These must respond to the implications of unequal power relations for women's agency and bargaining power, and to the unpaid care burden shouldered by women and girls. Social protection measures must recognize women and girls' experience of poverty and the barriers they face to access and use social protection benefits, public services and resources.

✚ Integrate comprehensive SRH services in health benefit packages and primary health care. Both are essential to achieving universal health coverage. Part of this push must be to remove barriers and discriminatory practices with regard to gender and age in health-related data collection and management. Health service delivery systems that overlook or restrict access to women, girls and other individuals facing intersectional discrimination must be reformed.

✚ Close education resource gaps by dismantling barriers to schools and learning for all children and young people, particularly girls in marginalized communities. Investment in foundational skills learning must be prioritized through reforms to education system policies and budget allocations, pedagogy and teaching practices, and learning assessment methodologies. Technological and other innovations can be leveraged to support these reforms. Investment directed at improving learning outcomes should start from early childhood education and home parent-directed stimulation programmes, with gender-transformative elements.

✚ Modernize skills development schemes and curricula to further close equity gaps in skills and enable the population to transition into formal, green and decent jobs, prioritizing support to women and girls and those at risk of exclusion in the green and just transition and digitalization, such as older persons and persons with disabilities.

✚ Increase investment for supporting women and girls to keep up with digital connectivity and skills, especially at the higher levels.

✚ Ensure that strategies and actions to reduce poverty and improve social protection, health, education and skills development are always accompanied by sufficient and feasible financing plans. Depending on national and subnational contexts, a combined financing scheme may be employed to mobilize resources through gender-responsive public budgets and other innovative private-sector and multilateral financing schemes (see Chapter 8 for further discussion).

✚ Acknowledge women and girls' agency and introduce accountability mechanisms that meaningfully engage women and girls in decision-making, monitoring and evaluation of policy and programme effectiveness.

✚ Mandate tailored programmes to transform social norms that impede women and girls' equal access to assets, resources and opportunities, targeting policy makers, decision makers and personnel involved in poverty reduction, social protection, healthcare and education systems as well as the general public.

CHAPTER 3

Shared prosperity and decent work

Solar engineering trainer working at Barefoot College, India. © UN-Women/Gaganjit Singh

KEY MESSAGES

The advancement of gender equality in the world of work is central to women's economic empowerment. Despite progress in some areas, gender disparities in labour markets remain entrenched in Asia and the Pacific. Promoting shared prosperity and decent work calls for accelerated action to enhance women's access to the labour market, quality employment and entrepreneurship opportunities. Bolstering investment in the care economy would create new job opportunities and help tackle the disproportionate amount of unpaid care and domestic responsibilities shouldered by women and girls that cause many labour market disparities.

Access to labour markets

Women in Asia and the Pacific continue to face difficulties in accessing labour markets on an equal footing to men.

✚ Labour force participation rates for both women and men aged over 15 have declined in the past three decades, partially explained by population ageing and positive socioeconomic developments, such as reduced poverty rates and young persons staying longer in education.

✚ However, the regional gender gap in labour force participation has widened. The female-to-male ratio in labour force participation rates decreased from 63.2 per cent in 1995 to 59.6 per cent in 2024.

✚ Less than half, or 44 per cent, of the region's working-age women (aged 15+) are in the labour force, compared to 74 per cent of men in 2024. The female labour force participation rate is particularly low in South and South-West Asia (25.6 per cent).[1]

✚ **South and South-West Asia** is driving the widening of the gender gap in labour force participation in the region. While gender gaps in labour force participation have narrowed to varying degrees in different subregions, the continuing large gender gap (female-to-male ratio in labour force participation rate at merely 34.4 per cent) in South and South-West Asia, which is home to a growing share of the region's population, drives the increase in the gap for the region as a whole.

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1 ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Labour force participation", ILO modelled estimates, female and male aged 15+, percentage, database. Available at https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/. (accessed on 14 June 2024). Data presented in the ESCAP database was retrieved from ILO STAT on 28 November 2023.

- The disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work responsibilities women and girls bear is a major underlying factor that prevents them from entering and staying in the labour market.[2] This is evidenced by the realities that parenthood (having young children under age 6) widens the gender gap in for women and men of prime working age (25 to 54 years old) by lowering women's participation (motherhood penalty) while increasing men's participation in the labour force (fatherhood premium). In contrast, the gender gap is narrower for women and men in this age group who do not have young children.

- Gender-based violence and safety concerns in public spaces and transportation also constitute barriers for women to participate in the labour force.

- The compounding impact of intersectional bias and discrimination on women from diverse backgrounds remains a significant issue. For example, women with disabilities are more likely to be excluded from the labour market, with an average labour force participation rate of merely 18 per cent.[3]

- More women than men who want a job do not have one. The jobs gap for women (9.1 per cent) in the region is substantially higher than for men (6.6 per cent) in 2024.[4]

- Young women are overrepresented among the youth (aged 15–24) who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) in almost every Asia-Pacific country (38 out of 44) for which data is available.[5]

- The regional gender gap in youth NEET rate in Asia and the Pacific remains larger than the world average gap, despite a modest reduction since 2005. All countries with the largest gender gap in youth NEET rates are located in the **South and South-West Asia** subregion.

- Women's economic empowerment is impeded by occupational segregation that tends to direct women into low-skill and low-wage jobs while preventing them from high-skill and high-wage occupations in growing sectors, including those most relevant to the digital and green economies. In 12 out of 20 Asia-Pacific countries with data, women make up less than 40 per cent of the STEM workforce.[6]

Working conditions and quality of work

In addition to labour market access, gender inequalities are evident in working conditions and the quality of employment.

- Women's hourly salaries tend to be lower than those of men's in most Asia-Pacific countries for which data is available.[7] The gender pay gaps are more prevalent among professionals, technicians, and service and sales workers than among managers.

- When counting all wage employees, the self-employed and other categories of workers, the regional gender income gap has narrowed since 2004 but remains significant, with women estimated to earn 44 cents for every dollar earned by men.[8] The biggest gender income gap in the region is in **Southern Asia**, where women earn only 20 per cent of men's income.

- The gender pay and income gap is intricately linked to deep-rooted gender social norms and stereotypes that lead to gender occupational segregation, undervaluation of "feminized" occupations, women's labour market disadvantages due to unpaid care and domestic responsibilities, and the misconception of women being less capable than men when undertaking work of equal value.

- Approximately 3 in 5 employed women in the region are engaged in informal work,[9] which in turn exposes them to poor working conditions and work-related contingencies in the absence of sufficient legal and social protection.

- Informal employment rates are higher for women in lower-middle income countries and higher for men in upper-middle income countries.

- Women with disabilities, migrants, young persons and older persons are more likely to engage in informal work.

2   ESCAP, "Female Labour Force Participation and the Care Economy in Asia and the Pacific", policy paper (Bangkok2022).
3   ESCAP, *A Three-Decade Journey Towards Inclusion* (United Nations publication, 2022). https://www.unescap.org/kp/2022/three-decade-journey-towards-inclusion-assessing-state-disability-inclusive-development.
4   ILO STAT Database, "Jobs gap rate by sex", ILO modelled estimates (May 2024). Available at https://ILO STAT.ilo.org/data/ (accessed 14 June 2024).
5   ESCAP elaboration based on ESCAP SDG Gateway: "SDG: 8.6.1 - Youth not in education, employment or training", database. Available at https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/ (Accessed 14 June 2024.).
6   ILO STAT, "Where women work: Female dominated sectors and occupations", blog, 7 November 2023. Available at https://ILO STAT.ilo.org/where-women-work-female-dominated-occupations-and-sectors/ (accessed 14 June 2024). ILO STAT.
7   ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Average hourly earnings, all occupations", database. Available at https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/ (accessed 28 March 2024).
8   ILO STAT Database, "Gender income gap, ratio of women's to men's labour income", ILO modelled estimates (Nov 2023), earliest and latest year available. Available at https://ILO STAT.ilo.org/data/ (accessed on 1 April 2024).
9   ILO STAT Database, "Informal employment rate (% of employment)", ILO modelled estimates (Nov. 2023). Available at https://ILO STAT.ilo.org/data/ (accessed on 3 April 2024).

+ At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, women informal workers in the region were hit harder than men in the informal sector, as is evidenced by a sharper drop in the informal employment rates for women. This points to women's relative disadvantage in accessing labour market protection.

+ In the majority of Asia-Pacific countries and territories with available data, women are overrepresented in vulnerable employment. This type of employment includes workers defined as own-account workers, who work for themselves without any regular employees and are personally liable to cover all expenses and losses, and contributing family workers, who work without pay within a family unit. The share of own account workers and contributing family workers accounted for 40 per cent of the region's labour force in 2022.

+ The vulnerability women experience in the labour market in Asia and the Pacific is determined by their concentration in sectors associated with informal and poor working conditions, such as agriculture, manufacturing, the retail trade and accommodation.

+ One in five workers in Asia and the Pacific reported experiencing some form of violence and harassment at work. This included physical, psychological and sexual violence and harassment. Women more often reported experience of sexual violence and harassment at work. Men are more likely to experience work-related physical violence and harassment, as well as psychological violence.

+ Younger women (aged 15 to 24), women migrants and informal workers are more likely to experience work-related violence and harassment, particularly sexual violence and harassment.

+ Most of the region's workers do not benefit from protection against unemployment, sickness or work-related injuries. There is very limited data available on gender differences in effective coverage by these benefits. The effective coverage rates of unemployment protection and work-related injury schemes are concerningly low in **South and South-West Asia**.

+ Social protection systems in the region tend to be gender blind and neglect labour market disadvantages faced by women.[10]

+ Women continue to be underrepresented in social dialogue and collective bargaining processes, including among the leadership of workers' and employers' organizations, and in national social dialogue institutions in the region. They account for only 20 per cent of trade unions' wage negotiation teams in the region.[11] Less than a third of the region's employers' organizations have achieved gender parity in their management.[12]

The care economy

Women's disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work responsibilities has been one of the biggest contributing factors to the persistent gender inequalities in the region's labour market.

+ In most countries of Asia and the Pacific (13 out of 15) with available relevant data, the amount of time that women spend on unpaid care and domestic work each day is two to five times longer than men.[13]

+ The majority of domestic workers, who are overrepresented by women and girls in the region and a main source of paid care labour, are excluded from legal protection with regard to working conditions, minimum wages, social protection benefits and freedom from abuse, exploitation and violence at work.

+ Investing in the care economy presents a pathway towards addressing the region's care deficit; valuing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care and domestic work; creating decent care work for both women and men in the paid care sector, and enabling women's economic empowerment.

+ Investing in the care economy requires concerted efforts in the areas of care infrastructure, employment-related care policies, care-related social protection and care services.

10   International Labour Organization (ILO). *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social Protection at the Crossroads – in Pursuit of a Better Future* (Geneva, 2021).

11   King (2018) as cited in ILO, *Organizing Women Migrant Workers: Manual for Trade Unionists in ASEAN* (Geneva, 2021).

12   ILO and International Organization of Employers (IOE), *Women in business: How employer and business membership organizations drive gender equality* (Geneva, 2024).

13   ESCAP elaboration based on ESCAP SDG Gateway: "Time spent on unpaid domestic chores and care work (% of time in a day, total female and male aged 15+, most recent year)". Available at https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/ (accessed 14 June 2024).

Entrepreneurship

Women-owned businesses are a major contributor to the region's growth. However, women entrepreneurs face additional barriers to starting and scaling up their businesses due to unfavourable, discriminatory regulations and practices. They frequently lack access to finance, markets, business skills and support networks.

✚ In Asia and the Pacific, women are less likely to own or co-own a business. While women do own approximately 60 per cent of micro, small, or medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), the businesses they own are overwhelmingly micro-sized and informal enterprises. In contrast, most larger businesses are owned by men.[14]

✚ Only 17 out of 47 economies in Asia and the Pacific prohibit gender-based discrimination in access to credit.[15]

✚ Globally, only one per cent of public and private procurement spending goes to women-owned enterprises while the share in Asia and the Pacific cannot be measured due to the absence of sex-disaggregated procurement data.[16]

✚ To level the playing field for women entrepreneurs, there is a need to promote an enabling entrepreneurial ecosystem that is gender-responsive and holistically considers the specific constraints and inequalities facing women.

Tackling gender inequalities must be an integral part of the action to address labour market challenges in Asia and the Pacific, particularly in the age of megatrends. To achieve this ambition, countries need to remove discrimination and barriers women and girls face in labour legislation, regulatory frameworks, labour market policies and practices and governance. A sustained push is needed to combat biased gender social norms that underlie labour market inequalities. Particular efforts are required to address intersectional discrimination and equity gaps, and to manage risks and opportunities presented in the care, green and digital economies by incorporating gender-responsive considerations in the planning, investment and governance of these emerging sectors.

3.1 OVERVIEW

Advancing gender equality in the world of work is a cornerstone of achieving women's economic empowerment. Yet, women in the Asia-Pacific region continue to face significant and sometimes growing barriers in the labour market. Such inequalities in Asia-Pacific labour markets hold back both the empowerment of women and the prosperity of whole economies. Rapid ageing of the populations poses challenges to the region's labour force sustainability, economic dependency levels, and growth. It creates impetus for countries to improve the productivity of their workforces and to dismantle structural barriers that hinder workers from entering and remaining active in the economy and prevent many countries from tapping a larger and more diverse pool of workers. Megatrends – namely intensifying climate and environmental crises, and digital and technological transformation – are changing the world of work in the region. They can offer new opportunities for job creation and improved productivity. Yet, unless the structural barriers and social norms that underlie inequalities in the world of work are dismantled, women and other population groups in vulnerable situations are at risk of further exclusion and exploitation.

The central role of decent work in achieving gender equality is embodied in critical area of concern F (women and the economy) of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA), SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 8 (decent work and inclusive growth). The agreed conclusions adopted at the sixty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW61) in 2017 urge Governments and other stakeholders to take action to advance women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work. Key intervention areas include strengthening normative and legal frameworks; enhancing education, training and skills development; implementing economic and social policies for women's economic empowerment; addressing the growing informality of work and mobility of women workers; managing technological and digital change; promoting women's collective voice, leadership and decision-making; and increasing the role of the private sector. These recommendations remain valid and highly relevant today. Moreover, the CSW67 (2023) agreed conclusions explicitly recognize that mainstreaming a gender perspective in the digital economy is essential for women's economic autonomy in the digital age. Gender inequalities in Asia-Pacific labour markets hold back both the potential of individuals and the prosperity of economies as a whole.

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14 Asian Development Bank (ADB) and UN-Women. *Gender-Responsive Procurement in Asia and the Pacific: An opportunity for an Equitable Economic Future* (Manila, 2022).

15 World Bank, "Women, Business, and the Law 2.0 Data for 2024", database. Available at https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl-data. (accessed on 27 March 2024).

16 ADB and UN-Women, *Gender-Responsive Procurement in Asia and the Pacific: An opportunity for an Equitable Economic Future* (Manila, 2022).

Several ILO Conventions, such as C190 - Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190), C189 - Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189), C183 - Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No.183) and C156 - Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156), specifically address gender issues in the world of work. These legally binding international treaties establish fundamental principles to be implemented by ratifying countries in their efforts to achieve decent work and shared prosperity for all.

Chapter 3 reviews progress and challenges towards women's economic empowerment with a focus on access to labour markets, working conditions and the quality of employment. The chapter then discusses the care economy, including women's disproportionate unpaid care and domestic work responsibilities and strategic investment to address such burden while leveraging the care economy to empower women and girls. Challenges and solutions for women's entrepreneurship are also discussed.

3.2   ACCESS TO LABOUR MARKETS

While access to work opportunities is a critical element of women's economic empowerment and shared prosperity, women in Asia and the Pacific continue to face disproportionate difficulties in entering and staying in labour markets compared to men. A major driver underlying the gender gap is the reproductive expectations and unpaid care and domestic work responsibilities that fall disproportionately on women and girls. To bridge the gap, there is a need for interventions that mitigate the range of factors that prevent women from accessing labour markets on an equal footing to men. This section provides an overview of gender gaps in labour force participation; the gendered "jobs gap"; youth not in education, employment or training (NEET); and occupational segregation in the Asia-Pacific region, emphasizing the underlying, persisting gender norms. While the analysis takes an intersectional approach to account for the distinct realities of diverse groups of women, where possible, it is important to note that this

attempt is constrained by a significant lack of quality and comparable data disaggregated by sex and other identity characteristics.

3.2.1   Labour force participation

In Asia and the Pacific, labour force participation rates for both women and men aged 15 and older have consistently declined in the past three decades, not least as a result of positive socioeconomic developments, including reduced poverty rates and young persons staying longer in education and thus delaying their entry into labour markets.[17] Population ageing also lies behind the declining regional trend.[18] When looking at the core working-age group between 25 and 54 years old, the labour force participation rates of men and women have largely remained stable (with very modest declines) since 1995.[19, 20]

Nonetheless, **women are far less likely to be in the labour force than men, and the regional gender gap has widened.** For the region overall, 73.6 per cent of men and 43.9 per cent of women (aged 15 and over) are in the labour force, amounting to a sizeable gap of 29.7 percentage points in 2024. When measured in relative terms, the gender gap has widened. The female-to-male ratio in labour force participation rate decreased from 63.2 per cent in 1995 to 59.6 per cent in 2024 (Figure 3.1).[21]

The significant gender gap compounded by a growing population in South and South-West Asia is driving the widening regional gender gap in labour force participation. Looking at trends at the subregional level between 1995 and 2024, the female-to-male ratio in labour force participation rate increased from 75.5 per cent to 88.0 per cent in the Pacific subregion. Less noticeable increases have been observed in the other subregions.[22] However, the narrowing gaps at the subregional level have not amounted to a smaller gender gap at the regional level, mainly because South and South-West Asia, where the gap remains concerningly large at 34.4 per cent by female-to-male ratio in 2024, comprises a growing share of the region's population.[23]

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17   ILO, *Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2024: Promoting decent work and social justice to manage ageing societies* (Geneva, 2024).

18   Ibid.

19   In the age group 25–54, the male participation rate in Asia and the Pacific (by ILO definition) was 94.8 in 1995 compared to 93 per cent in 2022, and the female participation rate was 61.4 per cent in 1995 compared to 59.4 per cent in 2022. ILO STAT, "Labour force participation rate by sex and age", ILO modelled estimates (Nov. 2023), percentage – Annual. Available at https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer51/?lang=en&id=EAP_2EAP_SEX_AGE_NB_A (accessed on 24 July 2024).

20   When interpreting labour force participation statistics, two gender-related issues deserve attention. First, participation rates among certain groups of workers are likely to be underestimated. This is particularly the case for employed people who work for only a few hours in the reference period, are in unpaid employment, or work near or in their home, thereby mixing work and personal activities during the day. As more women than men are found in these situations, the number of women in employment and the labour force tend to be underestimated to a larger extent than the number of men. In addition, it is worth noting that persons outside the labour force may still engage in work activities, such as unpaid care and domestic work, volunteer work, unpaid trainee work or own-use production work, despite not being in employment. It is inaccurate to assume that all women and men outside the labour force are inactive. See ILO, "Spotlight on Work Statistics No 8: Persons outside the labour force: How inactive are they really? Delving into the potential labour force with ILO harmonized estimates", (Geneva, 2019).

21   ESCAP elaboration based on ESCAP SDG Gateway: "Labour force participation", ILO modelled estimates, female and male aged 15+, percentage. Available at https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/ (accessed on 14 June 2024). Data presented in the ESCAP database was retrieved from ILO STAT on 28 November 2023.

22   ESCAP elaboration based on ESCAP SDG Gateway: "Labour force participation", ILO modelled estimates, female and male aged 15+, percentage (accessed 23 July 2024). Data presented in the ESCAP database was retrieved from ILO STAT on 28 November 2023.

23   ILO, *Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2024: Promoting decent work and social justice to manage ageing societies* (Geneva, 2024).

FIGURE 3.1 **Change in gender gap in labour force participation (female-to-male ratio) between 1995 and 2024, by subregion**
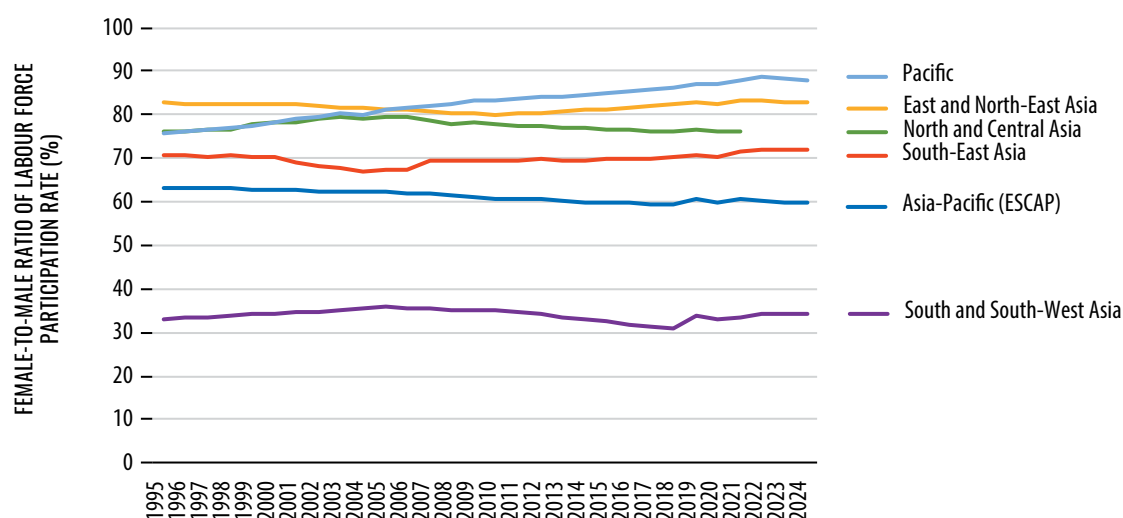
Source: ESCAP elaboration based on ESCAP SDG Gateway: Labour force participation (ILO est.) 15+, by sex, percentage (accessed 27 July 2024). Data presented in the ESCAP database was retrieved from ILOSTAT on 28 November 2023. The gender gap is calculated as the female-to-male ratio of labour force participation rate. Latest estimate for North and Central Asia is only available for 2021.

Comparing female labour participation rates across different regions of the world, **the Asia-Pacific region (43.9 per cent) falls behind the world average of 47.0 per cent, with only 25.6 per cent in South and South-West Asia.** In comparison, women in Asia and the Pacific are less likely to participate in the labour force than women in Africa (53.9 per cent), Europe (52.5 per cent), Latin America and the Caribbean (51.1 per cent) and North America (56.6 per cent).[24] They are more likely to be in the labour force than women in Arab States (19.7 per cent).[25] There is significant potential for the region to boost women's participation in the labour force.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a dip in labour force participation for both women and men in the region in 2020. This trend is shared across all subregions,[26] although the magnitude of the decline for women from 2019 to 2020 varied across subregions. The declines seen in the Pacific and North and Central Asia were milder than in the other three subregions. Further research would be beneficial to understand the reasons behind the relatively limited labour market consequence in these two regions. A modest recovery was observed since 2021, but the region's participation

rates have not recovered to the pre-pandemic level (2019) so far. In spite of larger year-to-year declines in the wake of the pandemic, South-East Asia and South and South-West Asia are the two subregions where female labour force participation has recovered at the fastest rates in the post-pandemic period (Figure 3.2).

A range of gender-related factors underlie the gender gaps and low female participation rates in the region. **Women's disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work responsibilities is a major factor preventing women from entering and staying in the labour market.**[27] In subregions such as South and South-West Asia, where female labour force participation is especially low and the gender gap particularly pronounced, biased gender social norms about women's roles and responsibilities in the household are often more entrenched.[28] **Gender-based violence and safety concerns also constitute barriers to women's labour force participation.** For example, experiences of violence and harassment at work can drive absenteeism and eventual resignation, especially in the case of persistent abuse or in the absence of effective complaint procedures.[29] The wide-ranging consequences of domestic violence

24 ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Female labour force participation", ILO modelled estimates, females aged 15+, percentage. Available at https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/ (accessed 14 June 2024).

25 ILO STAT Database, "Labour force participation rate by sex and age", ILO modelled estimates (Nov. 2023), percentage, annual. Available at https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer49/?lang=en&id=EAP_2WAP_SEX_AGE_RT_A (accessed on 27 May 2024).

26 ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Labour force participation", ILO modelled estimates, males aged 15+, percentage. Available at https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/. (accessed on 14 June 2024). Data presented in the ESCAP database was retrieved from ILO STAT on 28 November 2023. It can be noted that the relative percentage reduction compared to 2019 is larger for females due to the female rate being significantly lower.

27 ESCAP, "Female Labour Force Participation and the Care Economy in Asia and the Pacific", policy paper (Bangkok, 2022).

28 ILO and ADB, *Where women work in Asia and the Pacific: Implications for policies, equity and inclusive growth* (Bangkok, 2023).

29 ILO and UN-Women, Handbook: Addressing violence and harassment against women in the world of work (New York, 2019) and ILO, "Recommendation concerning the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work (No. 206)", web page. Available at https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO (accessed on 2 August 2024).

FIGURE 3.2   Labour force participation by sex (ILO est), 1995–2024, 15+, percentage
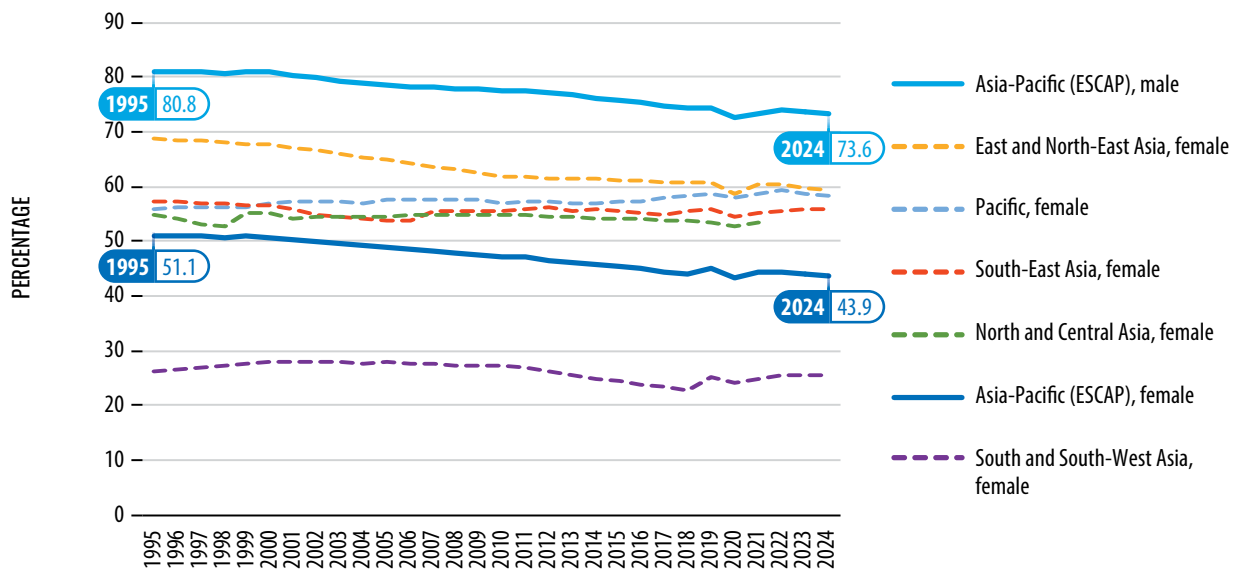
Source: ESCAP SDG Gateway: Labour force participation (ILO est.) 15+, percentage. (Accessed 14 June 2024).

can lead to victims/survivors exiting the workforce.[30] Safety concerns regarding public spaces and transport options can constitute a barrier to women's economic participation by reducing women's freedom of movement.[31]

The strong association between unpaid care and domestic responsibilities and gender gaps in labour force participation is evidenced by the opposite effect parenthood has on women and men. Mothers of young children are even more likely to be out of the labour force, a phenomenon known as the motherhood penalty.[32] Conversely, fathers experience a fatherhood premium and are more likely to be part of the labour force than non-fathers.[33] This drives the gender gap in labour force participation rates for the prime working-age population, aged 25 to 54 years old in Asia and the Pacific.[34] In this age group, the overall labour force participation rate is 61.0 per cent for women, compared to 92.1 per cent for men. However, for women of the same age group with children aged under 6 who live with their spouses or partners, the labour force participation rate drops to 49.1 per cent. For men under the same circumstances, participation increases to 95.8 per cent. In contrast, for women and

men of prime working age without young children, the gender gap is narrower (65.2 per cent for women and 91.3 per cent for men).[35] The motherhood penalty and fatherhood premium are especially pronounced in lower-income countries. For co-habiting parents with young children, the gender gap in labour force participation rate widens from 22.3 percentage points in high income countries to 63.6 percentage points in low-income countries (Figure 3.3). A lack of support mechanisms and services that can redistribute care responsibilities and reduce the unpaid care and domestic work carried out by women reinforces this phenomenon.[36]

The compounding impact of intersectional biases and discrimination on women from diverse backgrounds remains another significant issue. While persons with disabilities overall have a much lower level of labour force participation than persons without disabilities, women with disabilities are particularly excluded. In the countries of Asia and Pacific for which data is available, the population-weighted average labour force participation rate is 25.5 per cent for persons with disabilities and 64.5 per cent for persons without disabilities.

30 ILO, "Domestic violence and its impact on the world of work", brief (Geneva, 2020).

31 ILO and UN-Women, Handbook: Addressing violence and harassment against women in the world of work (New York, 2019) and ILO, "Recommendation concerning the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work (No. 206)", web page. Available at https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO (accessed on 2 August 2024).

32 A related term is the 'motherhood gap', where women start experiencing a pay gap during motherhood that follows them through their careers. Fatherhood premium, or fatherhood bonus, denotes the advantages that working fathers have in terms of pay and perceived competence as compared to working mothers and childless men. See for instance: ESCAP, "Female Labour Force Participation and the Care Economy in Asia and the Pacific", policy paper (Bangkok, 2022).

33 Women with children are less likely to be in the labour force than women without children, constituting a mother penalty. ESCAP, "Unpaid work in Asia and the Pacific", Social Development Working Paper No. 2019/02 (United Nations publication, 2019) and ILO, Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2022: Rethinking sectoral strategies for a human-centred future of work (Geneva, 2022).

34 See ILO regional grouping for Asia and the Pacific in Annex 2.

35 ILO STAT, "Prime-age labour force participation rate by sex and household type" ILO modelled estimates (Nov. 2023), percentage. Available at https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer34/?lang=en&id=GED_2LFP_SEX_HHT_RT_A (accessed on 14 June 2024).

36 ILO and ADB, Where women work in Asia and the Pacific: Implications for policies, equity and inclusive growth (Bangkok, 2023).

BOX 3.1 **Addressing barriers to female labour force participation through parental leave policies in Japan**

Japan has taken important steps towards addressing one of the key barriers to women's labour force participation by offering one of the most generous leave policies in the Asia-Pacific region for working parents. The uptake among fathers has been steadily growing since paternity leave was introduced in 2007. In June 2021, the government increased the flexibility of paternity leave policies and strengthened firm-level compliance obligations with the aim of reaching 30 per cent uptake among fathers by 2025.[1] In light of expectations around childrearing being a key impediment to women's labour force participation, such policies offer an important pathway towards closing gender gaps by allowing households to better balance work and care responsibilities, while also mitigating motherhood employment penalties. Although a broader range of factors are likely to be playing a part, employment rates among women in prime working age have been steadily increasing in recent years in Japan.

Introduced in the 1990s, the Childcare and Family Care Leave Act entitles working parents to request a partially paid childcare leave after the postnatal period until the child turns two years old.[2] Moreover, a post-partum lump-sum of 500,000 Japanese yen is provided to mothers regardless of their health insurance coverage.[3] Recent amendments to the Act allow employees to take childcare leave in a more flexible manner. For example, it gives parents the possibility to take childcare leave in up to two instalments.[4] Moreover, the amended Act now allows fathers to take a total of four weeks of partially paid leave within eight weeks of childbirth – in addition to the above-mentioned childcare leave – and give shorter notice beforehand (two weeks instead of four weeks). Apart from increased flexibility for parents, the Act also establishes specific requirements and obligations on companies to raise awareness and encourage the paternity leave system, with penalties for non-compliance. Additionally, businesses with more than 1,000 employees are required to publish data on uptake rates and to establish staff policies that recognize the possibility of male employees taking childcare leave. Although only around 7 per cent of fathers utilized their childcare leave entitlements in 2019 (compared to 83 per cent among women), the figure represents a five-fold increase in uptake since the introduction of paternity leave in 2007.[5] Furthermore, experiences from Scandinavian countries, where uptake among fathers was also low when leave policies were introduced, show that paternity leave policies are slow to take hold.[6]

Japan's policy measures are contributing to reducing gender gaps in care responsibilities and increasing women's participation in the labour force. According to ILO estimates, the participation rates among women in prime working age (aged 25–54) have substantially increased from around 65 per cent in 1995 to around 82 per cent in 2022.[7] Despite the female employment rate being at an all-time high and the positive trends, traditional gender roles and the consequent unbalanced distribution of care responsibilities persist. While progress is being made, accelerated efforts on several fronts are needed to dismantle the multifaceted barriers women face in Japan's labour market.

1   UNICEF, *Where do rich countries stand on childcare?* UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti (Florence, 2021).
2   Japan, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, *Outline of the Act on Childcare Leave/Caregiver Leave*. Available at https://www.mhlw.go.jp/bunya/koyoukintou/pamphlet/dl/02_en.pdf (accessed on 2 August 2024).
3   Japan, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare Japan, "Amount and payment method of the lump-sum childbirth and childcare allowance", web page. Available at https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/seisakunitsuite/bunya/kenkou_iryou/iryouhoken/shussan/index.html (accessed on 27 May 2024).
4   Ibid.
5   A record 12.65% of fathers in Japan took childcare leave in 2020. Japan, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, "Basic Survey of Gender Equality in Employment Management", *Japan Labor Issues*, vol. 6, No. 38 (n.p., 2022). Available at https://www.jil.go.jp/english/jli/documents/2022/038_01.pdf.
6   UNICEF, *Where do rich countries stand on childcare?* UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti (Florence, 2021).
7   ILO STAT, "Labour force participation", female and male aged 25–54, ILO modelled estimates. (accessed on 2 May 2024).

For women with disabilities, this rate is merely 17.8 per cent, compared to 51.7 per cent for women without disabilities, 33.0 per cent for men with disabilities and 77.8 per cent for men without disabilities.[37]

FIGURE 3.3 **Prime-age (25–54) labour force participation rates of parents living with children under age 6, by sex and country income group, Asia and the Pacific 2023**

Source: ILOSTAT, ILO modelled estimates: prime-age (15–24) labour force participation rates (accessed 14 June 2024.) Low-income countries in this context include Afghanistan and Democratic People's Republic of Korea, as classified by the World Bank. See Annex 2 for a full list of Asia-Pacific countries and territories included in the ILO model and the country-income groups by ILO STAT.

The current labour market is far from open, inclusive and accessible. Social norms and prejudices related to gender and disability are compounded by physical and digital inaccessibility. Persons with disabilities are denied equal access to education and vocational training, depriving particularly women with disabilities of equal opportunities in the labour market. While migration is a growing pathway to employment, women are underrepresented among cross-border migrant workers globally and in most Asia-Pacific subregions (i.e. Eastern Asia, South-Eastern Asia, the Pacific, and Southern Asia).[38] This is partly due to women facing greater obstacles, including labour market discrimination and challenges related to reconciling family responsibilities and working abroad.[39]

3.2.2 The gendered "jobs gap"

Gender gaps in labour force participation indicate that women face more difficulties in finding a job compared to men. Although the unemployment rate is a widely used labour market indicator, it has inherent limitations in terms of measuring labour underutilization.[40] A more insightful measure on gender disparities in Asia-Pacific labour markets is to examine the share of women and men who want a job but do not have one, the so-called "jobs gap".[41]

According to the ILO estimates for Asia and the Pacific,[42] **more women than men who want a job do not have one.** In 2024, the jobs gap for women in Asia and the Pacific is 9.1 per cent in comparison to 6.6 per cent for men. The jobs gaps for both women and men are seeing a long-term declining trend in Asia and the Pacific overall, although the COVID-19 pandemic sparked a significant spike in 2020. The pandemic's immediate effect on the jobs gap was stronger for men than for women. For men, the jobs gap rate increased by 15.6 per cent between 2019 and 2020, and by 6 per cent for women, according to the most recent ILO estimates. Yet the jobs gap for men has been closing at a faster pace than for women since 2021 (Figure 3.4a). Furthermore, the jobs gap for women shows large differences among Asia-Pacific countries at different country income levels.

In low-income countries, the jobs gap for women is estimated to be 17.7 per cent in 2024, much larger compared to the 10.4 per cent estimated in lower-middle income countries, 8.5 per cent in upper-middle income countries, and 5.7 per cent in high-income countries (Figure 3.4b). The same pattern across country-income groups also exists for the male jobs gap.[43] While the pandemic had an impact on the jobs gaps for women across country-income groups, the year-to-year increase in female jobs gaps between 2019 and 2020 was especially pronounced in high-income countries (by 15.6 per cent).[44] This could potentially be explained by relatively earlier adoption of virus control measures in high-income countries at the onset of the pandemic and the timeline of different waves of the infection surge in different countries. Further research is necessary to understand the underlying reasons better.

37   ESCAP, *A Three-Decade Journey Towards Inclusion* (United Nations publication, 2022).

38   Subregions by ILO definitions that differ from ESCAP subregional definitions. See Annex 2.

39   ILO, *ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers – Results and Methodology* (Geneva, 2021).

40   In the Asia-Pacific context, where large numbers of workers cannot afford to be unemployed as they lack access to social protection, the unemployment rate is an insufficient indicator of gender inequalities in the labour market. In order to be classified as unemployed, a person needs to be actively looking for a job and willing to take up a job on very short notice, usually a week. As a result, many people, especially women, who are jobless and willing to work are not captured in unemployment statistics. See ILO, *Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2022: Rethinking sectoral strategies for a human-centred future of work* (Geneva, 2022).

41   In comparison to unemployment rates, the 'jobs gap' indicator eases the restrictions on job searching and availability inherent in unemployment statistics, resulting in much higher estimates of labour underutilization, and larger gender disparities. ILO, "Spotlight on Work Statistics No.12: New data shine light on gender gaps in the labour market" (Geneva, 2023).

42   See ILO regional grouping for Asia and the Pacific in Annex 2.

43   ILOSTAT, "Jobs gap, Asia and the Pacific", ILO modelled estimates (May 2024), by sex and country income group, percentage (accessed on 14 June 2024).

44   Ibid.

FIGURE 3.4 **Jobs gap (%), Asia and the Pacific, male and female, and by country income group, 2005–2024**

A. JOBS GAP (%), ASIA AND THE PACIFIC (ILO), MALE AND FEMALE

B. FEMALE JOBS GAP (%) BY COUNTRY INCOME GROUP
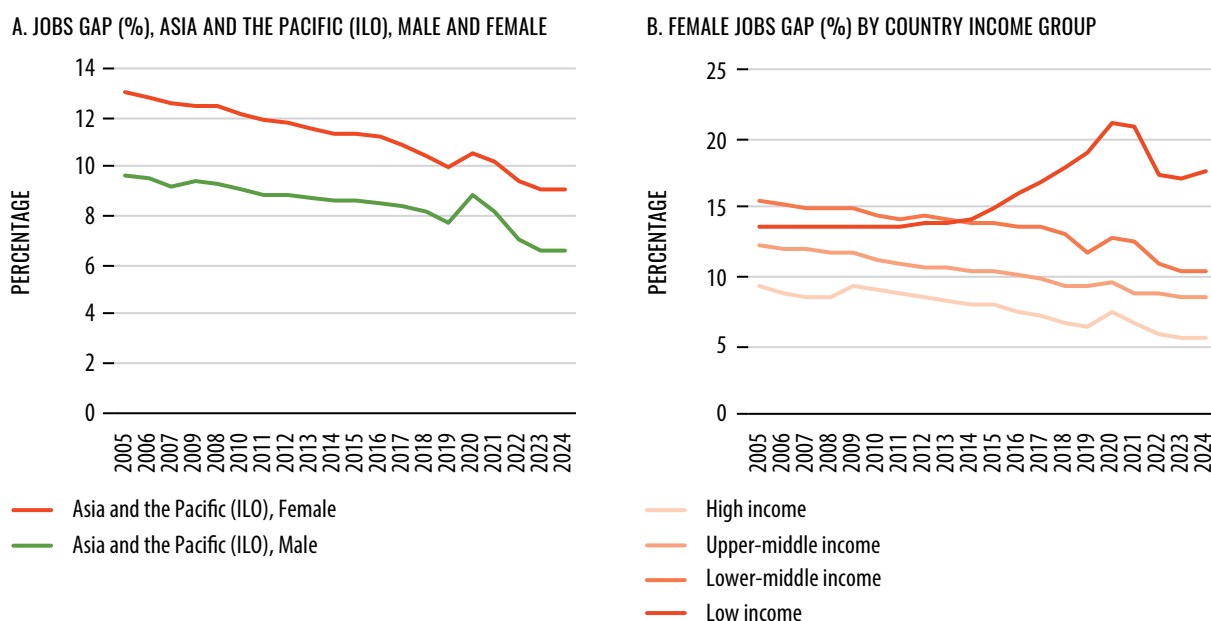
Source: ILO STAT, ILO Modelled Estimates. (Accessed 14 June 2024). Low-income countries covered in this modelled estimate include Afghanistan and Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Caution is recommended for interpreting the trend in jobs gap for women in this cluster of countries. The stark increase since 2014 may result from multiple significant events in these two countries that likely had major impacts on their economies, such as the 2014 presidential election and the 2021 Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, and the 2015 US financial sanctions on DPRK, in addition to the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.2.3 Not in employment, education or training (NEET)

Especially large gender gaps exist in the share of young persons (aged 15–24) not in employment, education or training (youth NEET) in the region (Figure 3.5). The youth NEET rate is a broad indicator that captures all the young persons who are out of the labour force, but not in school or training. While youth NEET are a heterogenous group, ranging from the short-term unemployed to those permanently out of the labour force, being classified as NEET often implies an unsuccessful school-to-work transition that results in lost economic and societal potential and an increased risk of social exclusion.[45] In all but six of the 43 Asia-Pacific countries and territories with available data, NEET rates among young women are higher than among young men. The average country-level gender gap amounts to 8.8 percentage points across the countries and territories with available data. Where the gender gap is the largest, the difference between the male and female youth NEET rates is 45.5 percentage points, in favour of men. The six countries with the largest gender gaps, all above 20 percentage points, are located in **South and South-West Asia** (Figure 3.5). The gender gap in youth NEET rate in Asia and the Pacific has always been larger than the global average (Figure 3.6b).

While the female youth NEET rate in Asia and the Pacific has modestly declined in the long term, it remains concerningly high, especially in low and lower-middle income countries. Overall, the region's female NEET rates declined from 38.4 per cent in 2005 (earliest available year) to 32.2 per cent in 2024, according to ILO modelled estimates. Nonetheless, the rate is increasing in low-income countries, to a concerning 63.6 per cent in 2024. While declining, the rates remain high in lower-middle income countries at over 40 per cent, in contrast to upper-middle income and high-income countries where female youth NEET rates account for 17.2 per cent and 6.9 per cent of young women (aged 15–24), respectively (Figure 3.6a).

3.2.4 Occupational segregation

Occupational segregation between women and men is deeply rooted in gender bias and stereotypes in the world of work. Over the past three decades, gender-based occupational segregation has increased in the region. Sectors related to education, social health and care, and family are typically feminized, while sectors such as information and communication technology (ICT), engineering, construction and transport are firmly in the male domain.[46] Some female-dominated professions and sectors, such as social and health

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45 ILO, *Youth not in employment, education or training in Asia and the Pacific: Trends and policy considerations* (Geneva, 2022).

46 ILO, *Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2024: Promoting decent work and social justice to manage ageing societies* (Geneva, 2024).

FIGURE 3.5   Gender gap in youth Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET), most recent year
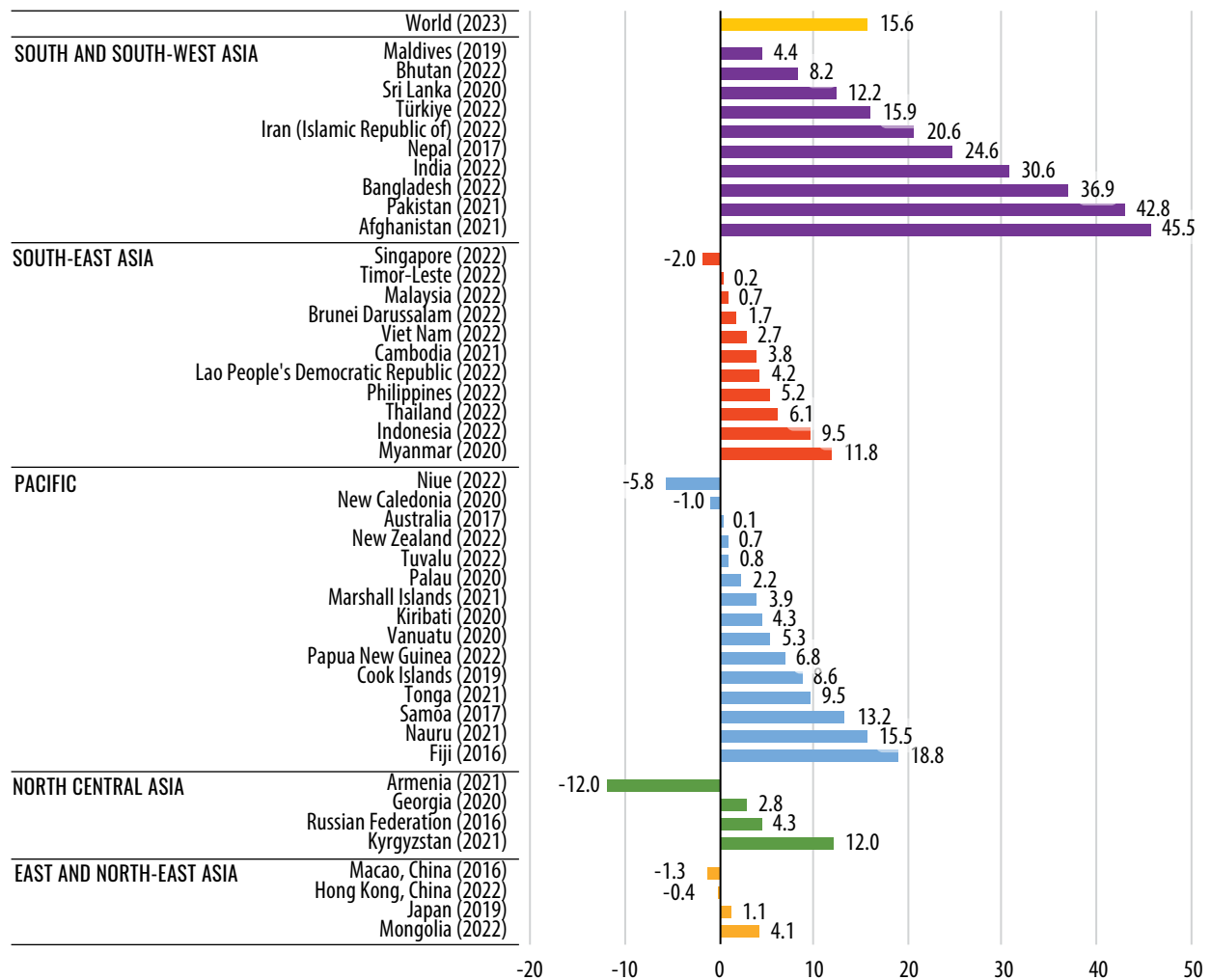
Source: ESCAP elaboration based on ESCAP SDG Gateway. SDG: 8.6.1 - Youth not in education, employment or training. Available at https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/ (Accessed 14 June 2024).

FIGURE 3.6   Female youth NEET rates by country income group; Gender gap in NEET rates Asia-Pacific and World, 2005–2024

A. FEMALE YOUTH NEET RATES ASIA AND THE PACIFIC (ILO), BY COUNTRY INCOME GROUP
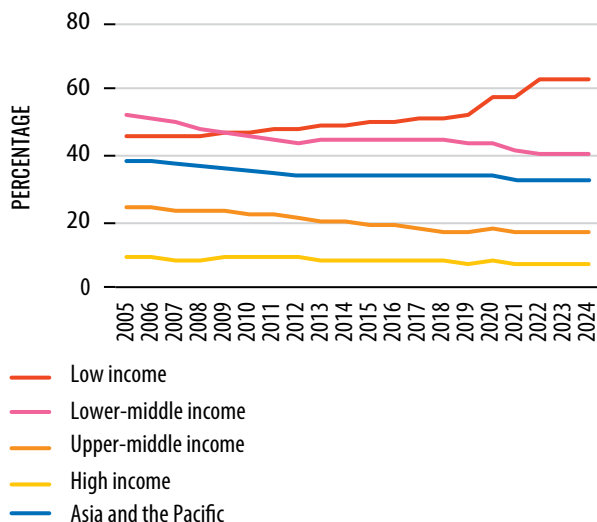
B. GENDER GAP IN NEET RATES, ASIA-PACIFIC (ILO) AND WORLD (PERCENTAGE POINT)
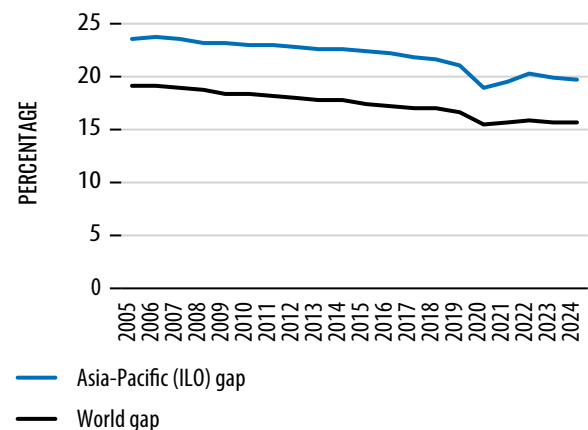
Source: ILOSTAT. ILO Modelled Estimates (the gender gap is an ESCAP elaboration). (Accessed 30 January 2024.) Low-income countries in this estimate include only Afghanistan and Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Interpretation with caution is recommended.

services, continue to experience undervaluation, perpetuating women's disadvantages in the world of work and leading to broader societal and economic implications. In the meantime, the barriers to women entering high-value and high-paying job sectors remain tremendously high.

Women remain underrepresented in STEM-related occupations overall, except for those related to healthcare.[47] **The representation of women in key STEM occupations associated with the digital and green economies is especially low.** Globally, women hold less than 25 per cent of science, engineering and ICT jobs and are underrepresented as scientific researchers, especially at senior levels.[48] Only around 10 per cent of civil engineers and software developers worldwide are women.[49] While data on the share of women in the STEM workforce is lacking for most countries in Asia and the Pacific, only 8 out of 20 countries and territories in the region report a female share above 40 per cent in the STEM workforce (Figure 3.7). While women and girls' enrolment in STEM education is growing, women and girls continue to face barriers in acquiring the skills that are in demand, such as advanced digital and engineering skills, in the booming digital and green economies (see more discussion in Chapter 2). Furthermore, in what has been described as a leaky pipeline, female STEM graduates are not always entering into careers linked to their education. This points to the need to enable smoother transition from STEM education and employment for women and girls.[50]

Gender occupational segregation reinforces labour market inequalities. For instance, the most rapidly growing sector in Asia and the Pacific, ICT, generally offers a higher standard of wages and working conditions than other sectors. However, the ICT sector is heavily male dominated. Only 25 per cent of the new jobs generated in the sector go to women, leaving them excluded from higher-value economic opportunities in a part of the region's economy that is booming.[51] This has consequences beyond the labour market. As women are poorly represented in ICT professions, their needs are not sufficiently reflected in the design, marketing, usage and governance of nascent technologies. This includes artificial intelligence and carries the risk of perpetuating gender inequalities.[52]

FIGURE 3.7   Share of the STEM workforce occupied by women, latest year
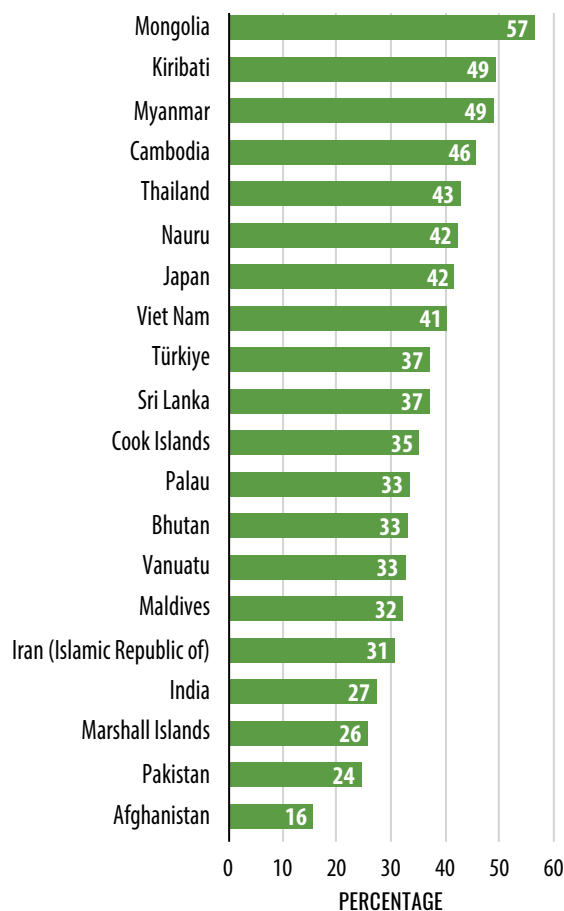
Source: ESCAP elaboration based on data from ILOSTAT, "Where women work: female-dominated occupations and sectors", blog, 7 November 2023. Available at: https://ilostat.ilo.org/blog/where-women-work-female-dominated-occupations-and-sectors/ (accessed 29 February 2024).

Gender occupational segregation is also reproduced in informal, gig work in which women are increasingly engaged. Digital gig work[53] performed or dispatched through digital platforms is a segment of the region's digital economy that has grown exponentially, not least in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. While digital gig work provides income, work opportunities and flexibility for many women and men, women tend to dominate domestic and care services provided platforms while men dominate app-based delivery and taxi services.[54] Similarly, gender occupational segregation is common among migrant workers which represent another major source of informal labour in the region. Women migrants from South-East Asia are

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47   ESCAP, *The Future Is Equal: Gender Equality in the Technology Industry* (United Nations publication, 2021).

48   UN-Women and United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs (UNDESA), *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The gender snapshot 2023* (New York, 2023).

49   ILO STAT, "Where women work: Female dominated sectors and occupations", blog, 7 November 2023. Available at https://ILO STAT.ilo.org/where-women-work-female-dominated-occupations-and-sectors/ (accessed 14 June 2024). ILO STAT.

50   World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2023* (Cologny/Geneva, 2023).

51   ILO STAT, "Where women work: Female dominated sectors and occupations", blog, 7 November 2023. Available at https://ILO STAT.ilo.org/where-women-work-female-dominated-occupations-and-sectors/ (accessed 14 June 2024).

52   UNESCO, "To be smart, the digital revolution will need to be inclusive: excerpt from the UNESCO science report" (Paris, 2021).

53   The term 'gig work' commonly refers to work facilitated through digital labour platforms and is also known as 'platform work'. ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook 2021: The Role of Digital Labour Platforms in Transforming the World of Work* (Geneva, 2021).

54   Ibid.

more likely to be engaged in domestic work, labour-intensive manufacturing, agriculture and hospitality. Men migrant workers from the Pacific are more often engaged in seasonal work in Australia and New Zealand, and the overwhelming majority of those from Asia and the Pacific are employed in the construction sector in Gulf Cooperation Council countries.[55]

To improve women's access to the labour market and address the persistent occupational segregation, various Asia-Pacific countries have implemented Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs). These have focused on boosting the employment of women, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), reskilling and job-matching and improving social protection (see Chapter 2 for examples). Various measures have been taken to incentivize the employment of women (Viet Nam),[56] establish family-friendly workplace policies such as flexible working arrangements and facilities (Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, Russian Federation, Republic of Korea, and Singapore), implement affirmative actions to put women in STEM career pipelines (Armenia, China, Singapore, and Türkiye), and strengthen professional and peer-to-peer support networks for women (Cambodia, Iran, New Zealand, Kazakhstan, Samoa, Singapore, and Timor-Leste).[57]

3.3 WORKING CONDITIONS AND QUALITY OF WORK

Alongside gender disparities in labour market access, significant gender disparities exist in working conditions and the quality of employment in the region. These disparities are especially pronounced in areas such as pay and income, exposure to informality and vulnerability, violence and harassment at work, access to work-related social protection, and representation in social dialogue. Women who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, such as women with disabilities, rural women, women migrant, and indigenous women, often encounter additional physical, informational, attitudinal and institutional barriers to accessing decent work.

3.3.1 Gender pay and income gaps

Earnings are a fundamental aspect of working conditions and living standards. The concept of pay equity is included in SDG Target 8.5, which calls for "equal pay for work of equal value". The gender pay gap, which refers to the difference in pay between women and men employees, is a stubborn phenomenon. Globally, female employees on average earn 18.8 per cent less than their male counterparts.[58] While a large degree of variety in the gender pay gap exists across countries, most countries continue to report gender disparities in pay levels.

In Asia and the Pacific, women's average hourly earnings are less than that of men in 19 out of 28 countries and territories with available data, with all occupations counted. **Where the pay gap is the largest, women earn only 60 per cent of the average hourly salary of men.** In the other seven countries and territories, women earn more than men on average (Figure 3.8).[59] ILO's factor-weighted gender pay gap analysis on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in selected countries shows that the gender pay gaps did not alter greatly during the COVID-19 pandemic, while various degrees of increase in the gender gaps in median hourly and monthly wages were observed in some countries in South-East Asia.[60]

Gender pay gaps to the disadvantage of women are also found more prevalent among professionals, technicians and service and sales workers, and less common among managers. The pay gaps could be overestimated or underestimated, without considering difference in occupations.[61] Data available from 27 Asia-Pacific countries and territories show that gender pay gaps are even more prevalent among professionals, with men earning higher average hourly wages than women in 23 countries and the gap ranging from 3.7 per cent to 42.2 per cent. Similar gender pay gaps exist among technician and associate professionals in 19 out of 26 countries with data, and among service and sales workers among 21 out of 27 countries with data. The gender pay gaps are less common among managers, with men earning more than women in 17 out of 27 countries with data and conversely in the other ten countries.[62]

55 ILO, Labour migration in Asia and the Pacific (Geneva, 2023).

56 Businesses that employ a certain share of women in their workforces are eligible for various state support under the Law on Assistance for Small and Medium Enterprises (2017) and preferential contracting policies related to public procurement under the Law on Bidding No. 22/2023/QH15 (2023). See Law on Support for Small- and Medium-sized Enterprises (toaan.gov.vn) and https://cdn.luatvietnam.vn/uploaded/Others/2024/01/22/Legal_Newsletter_No._01_-2024_Fin_2201192116.pdf (accessed on 6 August 2024).

57 National reports on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action submitted by respective countries. Available at: https://www.asiapacificgender.org/node/244 (accessed on 5 August 2024).

58 Mean factor weighted gender pay gap using hourly wages. ILO, Global Wage Report 2018-2019: What lies behind gender pay gaps (Geneva, 2018).

59 The ILO data concerns all occupations and its statistics on earnings come from a variety of sources, including establishment surveys, household surveys and administrative records. Each type of source has a specific coverage, scope and characteristics. This makes international comparability difficult. The use of non-standard definitions and the heterogeneity of operational criteria applied can hamper cross-country comparisons.

60 ILO, Global Wage Report 2022-23: The impact of inflation and COVID-19 on wages and purchasing power (Geneva, 2022).

61 ILO, Women in Business and Management: Understanding the gender pay gap (Geneva, 2020). https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---act_emp/documents/publication/wcms_735949.pdf.

62 ESCAP elaboration based on ESCAP SDG Gateway: "SDG 8.5.1 - Average hourly earnings; all occupations" (accessed on 25 July 2024).

FIGURE 3.8 **Gender pay gap in hourly wages, all occupations, latest year**
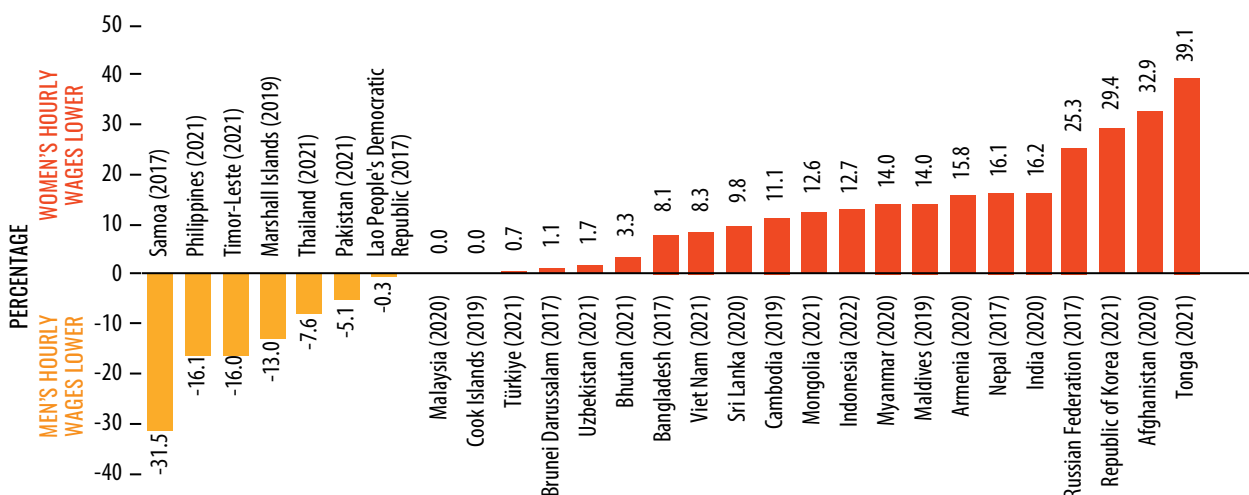
Source: ESCAP elaboration based on ESCAP SDG Gateway. SDG 8.5.1 - Average hourly earnings; all occupations. (Accessed 28 March 2024.) The pay gap is calculated as: (difference in *average hourly earnings between men and women / average hourly earnings men*) × 100.

When considering the earnings of all workers, including waged employees, the self-employed and other categories of workers who are not waged employees and account for around half of the world's workers, **the gender income gaps are even starker even though they have narrowed since 2004.**[63] **In Asia and the Pacific, women earn an estimated 43.9 cents for every dollar earned by men.** In low and lower-middle income economies, this figure falls further to 23.2 cents and 24.3 cents, respectively, for every dollar earned by a man. Subregional differences are also evident. In Southern Asia, women earn only 20.1 per cent of men's labour income, in contrast to the Pacific Islands where women earn as much as 65.1 per cent of men's labour income. The gender income gap in Asia and the Pacific as a whole has decreased since 2004 (Table 3.1).[64]

The correlation between gender gaps in education and in income may no longer hold true. Despite women having become more educated than previous generations, with increased enrolment and completion rates at all educational levels, these advancements have not necessarily translated into better economic opportunities and outcomes for women. For example, among the 59 countries where adult women are more educated than men, the average income gap remains at 39 per cent. In some countries, while women surpass men in tertiary education and advance in STEM education, women's educational attainment and skills tend to be undervalued in comparison to men's,[65] resulting in high gender pay gaps in STEM occupations.[66] Among countries achieving high Human Development Index

TABLE 3.1 **Gender income gap, ratio of women's to men's labour income, ILO modelled estimates (Nov 2023), earliest and latest year available**

REFERENCE AREA	2004	2021
World	46.2	51.7
Asia and the Pacific	35.9	43.9
Asia and the Pacific: Low income	28.1	23.2
Asia and the Pacific: Lower-middle income	19.2	24.3
Asia and the Pacific: Upper-middle income	50.9	54.2
Asia and the Pacific: High income	36.3	48.8
Eastern Asia	43.4	52.9
South-Eastern Asia	43.7	51.6
Pacific Islands	50.5	65.1
Southern Asia	15.2	20.1
Central and Western Asia	38.6	48.1

Source: ILOSTAT ILO modelled estimates. (Accessed 1 April 2024).

Note: Low-income countries in this context include Afghanistan and Democratic People's Republic of Korea, as classified by the World Bank. See Annex 2 for a full list of Asia-Pacific countries and territories included in the ILO model and the country-income groups.

63 The gender income gap takes into account the income of all workers, including those who may not be waged employees, such as the self- employed. It furthermore takes into account women's lower participation in paid employment. See ILO, "Spotlight on Work Statistics No.12: New data shine light on gender gaps in the labour market" (Geneva, 2023).
64 See ILO regional grouping for Asia and the Pacific in Annex 2.
65 ILO, *Global Wage Report 2018-2019: What lies behind gender pay gaps* (Geneva, 2018).
66 UNDP, *Women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) in the Asia Pacific* (New York, 2024).

(HDI) values, significant gender gaps in labour markets and economic outcomes are prevalent. These findings suggest that persistent gender gaps in income can no longer be attributed to gender gaps in education. Instead, the former tends to be intricately linked to entrenched social norms and gender stereotypes.[67]

Gender pay and income gaps are deeply rooted in social norms and stereotypes that result in an array of labour market disadvantages for women.[68] Fewer women than men are in management and leadership positions associated with higher salaries. Even if they are managers, they tend to be tasked to manage human resources and administrative portfolios more often than other portfolios, suggesting a perpetuated gender-based occupational segregation, even at the managerial level (see Chapter 5). The gender income gaps are further fuelled by the undervaluation of typically "feminized" occupations such as nurses, personal care workers, cleaners and helpers, and food preparation assistants. Workers in these occupations tend to be paid less due to social norms that undervalue women's work. The disproportionate unpaid care and domestic work undertaken by women often reduces their working hours, pushing many into part-time and informal employment.[69] It also imposes career breaks on women that impact their return to full-time employment and career advancement and in turn, undermines their pay levels throughout their career.[70] Women migrants tend to face a double-penalty in pay for being both women and migrants, generally earning less than men migrants, and women and men non-migrants.[71] Furthermore, part of the gender pay gap may be ascribed to persistent gender social norms that perceive women being less capable or less likely to be high performers, even when they do the same work as men.[72]

Accelerated action on several fronts is needed to address the persistent gender gaps in pay and income. Establishing and effectively implementing legislation and policies that prohibit discrimination against women in the labour market continue to be important for the region. Strengthening pay transparency at all levels and periodic gender pay gap audits can help identify gender differences in pay, and equipping

workers with evidence they need to negotiate pay rates and challenge discrimination.[73] Addressing gender occupational segregation, equipping women with the skills and career pipelines to enter higher-paying job sectors and managerial positions and improving pay transparency are another set of important measures. Public policies and services need to help address the so-called "motherhood penalty", and more broadly the disproportionate unpaid care and domestic responsibilities shouldered by women. This is essential to enable more women to enter and stay in formal employment. Tackling the deep-rooted gender social norms about women's roles, capability and the value of their work should be integral to all efforts aimed at eliminating gender pay and income gaps.

3.3.2 Informal and vulnerable employment

A vast majority (65.5 per cent) of employment in the Asia-Pacific region[74] **is informal in 2024.** The informal employment rates are significantly higher in low-income and lower-middle income countries (Table 3.2). While the share of informal workers has slowly declined in the long term for both women and men, progress has stagnated in recent years.[75] Defined by insufficient formal arrangements, informal workers are often not protected by labour legislation, do not pay income tax, are often not associated with labour or trade unions, and are generally not entitled to social protection and other benefits normally accorded to formal sector workers.[76] Due to these vulnerabilities, informal workers are more likely to be trapped in low-paying and precarious jobs.

The gender difference in informal employment varies across country income groups. In Asia and the Pacific overall, men (67.7 per cent) are more likely to be in informal employment than women (61.8 per cent), and the informality rates for both sexes are above the respective world averages. However, the regional aggregate masks significant variations across countries and sectors. For instance, informal employment rates are higher for women in lower-middle income countries, and for men in upper-middle income countries (Table 3.2).[77]

67   UNDP, *Breaking down Gender Biases: Shifting Social Norms towards Gender Equality* (New York, 2023).

68   ILO, *Pay transparency legislation: Implications for employers' and workers' organizations* (Geneva, 2022) and UNDP, *Breaking Down Gender Biases: Shifting social norms towards gender equality* (New York, 2023).

69   Women in the informal economy have been shown to face a double wage penalty, first for being an informal worker and also for being a woman, with the result that they generally earn less than both women in the formal economy and their male counterparts in the informal economy. See ILO, *Women and men in the informal economy: a statistical update* (Geneva, 2023).

70   ILO, *Global Wage Report 2018-2019: What lies behind gender pay gaps* (Geneva, 2018).

71   ILO, *The Migrant Pay Gap: Understanding Wage Differences Between Migrants and Nationals* (Geneva, 2020).

72   ILO, Women in Business and Management: Understanding the gender pay gap (Geneva, 2020).

73   ILO, *Pay transparency legislation: Implications for employers' and workers' organizations* (Geneva, 2022).

74   See ILO regional grouping for Asia and the Pacific in Annex 2.

75   Between 2004 and 2019, ILO estimates show informal employment rates declining from 73.8% to 68.2% for men and from 70.9% to 62.1% for women. However, between 2019 to 2024 the rate only declined by 0.7 percentage points for men and by 0.5 percentage points for women. ILOSTAT, "Informal employment rate", ILO modelled estimates (Nov 2023).Available at https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer50/?lang=en&id=EMP_2IFL_SEX_RT_A (accessed on 4 April 2024).

76   ILO, *Men and Women in the Informal Economy: A statistical update* (Geneva, 2023).

77   ILO STAT, "Informal employment rate by sex", ILO modelled estimates. Available at https://www.ilo.org/shinyapps/bulkexplorer40/?lang=en&id=EMP_2NIF_SEX_RT_A (accessed on 3 April 2024).

TABLE 3.2   **Informal employment rate (% of employment), ILO modelled estimates, 2024**

REFERENCE AREA	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
Asia and the Pacific	61.8	67.7	65.5
Asia and the Pacific: Low income	84.1	85.4	84.9
Asia and the Pacific: Lower-middle income	84.0	82.8	83.1
Asia and the Pacific: Upper-middle income	53.2	56.0	54.8
Asia and the Pacific: High income	18.3	18.2	18.2
World	55.2	59.6	57.8

Source: ILOSTAT, ILO modelled estimates. Low-income countries in this context include Afghanistan and Democratic People's Republic of Korea, as classified by the World Bank. See annex 2 for a full list of Asia-Pacific countries and territories included in the ILO model and the country-income groups. https://ilostat.ilo.org/resources/concepts-and-definitions/ilo-modelled-estimates/ (Accessed 3 April 2024).

BOX 3.2   **Closing gender pay gaps through increased transparency and comprehensive measures in Australia and New Zealand**

Australia

Despite a period of stalled progress during the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia has been on a long-term positive trajectory towards narrowing the overall gender pay gap.[1] Since centralized data collection began in 2013, the overall gender pay gap has reduced from 28.6 per cent to 21.7 per cent in 2023.[2] In particular, this development has been driven by explicit policy measures to reduce the gender pay gap as part of broader policies that aim to advance gender equality in the world of work. Recently, the Australian government has further expanded these measures and aimed to accelerate the closing of the gender pay gap through increased pay transparency and employer accountability.

Australia took important policy steps towards promoting gender equitable workplaces and promoting equal remuneration for women and men through the enactment of the 2012 Workplace Gender Equality Act (WGE Act). The WGE Act created a requirement for companies with over 100 employees to report on gender equality indicators, including gender pay gaps. Additionally, the WGE Act established the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), with the role of advising and reviewing employers' compliance, including assessing workplace gender data.[3] In March 2023, the WGE Act was amended to expand pay transparency and accountability for employers. Specifically, the 2023 amendment created a requirement for employers to share WGEA gender gap and industry benchmark reports with their board, and for large companies to develop gender equality policies on specific areas. Moreover, under the new legislation, the WGEA makes employer-specific gender pay gap reports public, in addition to publishing data on the gender pay gap at the national, industry and occupational levels.[4] In making pay gap data public and showing how individual companies compare to their industry peers, the new measures are intended to catalyse action by making employers more accountable and encouraging weak performers to take action to achieve more gender equal workplaces in Australia.[5]

In part driven by the renewed national focus on equal remuneration and gender equality, the total gender gap reduced by 1.1 percentage points between the two latest reporting periods (2021-2022 to 2022-2023), the second largest reduction observed since WGEA was established. Although the overall gender gap still stood at 21.7 per cent in 2023, the new transparency and accountability measures have contributed to revealing the extent of gender disparities in pay and have increased pressure on employers to address such disparities.[6]

1   Australia, Attorney-General's Department, Universal Periodic Review National Report of Australia (n.p., 2020).
2   Australia, Workplace Gender Equality Agency, *2022-23 WGEA Gender Equality Scorecard* (n.p., 2023).
3   Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012*. Available at https://www.legislation.gov.au/C2004A03332/latest/text.
4   Australia, Workplace Gender Equality Agency, "A Roadmap to Closing the Gender Pay Gap: WGEA Legislative Reforms FAQ", web page. Available at https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/FAQ_WGEA_Legislative_Reforms_2023_0.pdf (accessed on 2 August 2024).
5   Australia, Workplace Gender Equality Agency, "Employer gender pay gaps published for the first time", press release, 27 February 2024. Available at https://www.wgea.gov.au/newsroom/employer-gender-pay-gaps-published-first-time-Media-release (accessed on 2 August 2024).
6   Australia, Workplace Gender Equality Agency, *2022-23 WGEA Gender Equality Scorecard* (n.p., 2023).

BOX 3.2   Closing gender pay gaps through increased transparency and comprehensive measures in Australia and New Zealand *(continued)*

New Zealand

In New Zealand, the Public Service Commission has taken an intersectional approach to close pay gaps in the public service sector with promising results. Building on a previous three-year action plan, New Zealand's *Kia Toipoito Public Service Pay Gaps Action Plan 2021-2024* aims to make substantial progress towards closing gender, Māori, Pacific, and ethnic pay gaps among government employees, in line with the expectations set out in the Public Service Act 2020 and the Government Workforce Policy Statement 2021.[7] The *Kia Toipoito* action plan is centred around several drivers to close gender and other pay gaps, including by requiring that government entities publish pay gaps each year and ensure that bias does not influence starting salaries or pay for employees in similar roles. Taking a holistic approach that aims to address occupational segregation and underrepresentation in leadership, the action plan also requires that government entities in New Zealand to improve gender and ethnic representation in their workforce and leadership, develop equitable career pathways and opportunities to progress, and protect against bias and discrimination in human resources and remuneration policies and practices.[8]

The action plan has generated positive results. It has reduced the gender pay gap from 12.2 per cent in 2018 to 7.1 per cent in 2023, which is the lowest level in history for the public service gender pay gap. Furthermore, between 2018 and 2023, the Māori pay gap fell from 11.2 per cent to 5.4 per cent, while the Pacific pay gap fell from 21.6 per cent to 16.6 per cent.[9] During the period, the proportion of women, Māori, Pacific and ethnic managers also increased, with women comprising 55.9 per cent of public service managers in 2023.[10]

A common feature of both cases is the focus on increasing transparency to shed light on the extent of gender pay gaps as a means to spur further action. Furthermore, both countries have taken a comprehensive approach that seeks to address the issues underlying pay gaps, including occupational segregation and the underrepresentation of women in leadership. While pay gaps and other gender inequalities are still present, the measures taken to date have resulted in substantial progress.

7   New Zealand Government. An Introduction to Pay Gaps and Kia Toipoto. https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/assets/Intro-to-Pay-Gaps.pdf.

8   New Zealand, Public Service Commission, "Kia Toipoto: Closing Gender, Māori, Pacific and Ethnic Pay Gaps", Public Service Action Plan 2021-24.Available at https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/assets/DirectoryFile/Kia-Toipoto-V8.pdf.

9   New Zealand, Public Service Commission, "Workforce Data - Pay gaps", web page. Available at: https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/research-and-data/workforce-data-remunerationpay/workforce-data-pay-gaps(accessed on 31 April 2024).

10   New Zealand, Public Service Commission, "Public Service Leadership Dashboard", infographic (n.p., 2023).

Gender difference in informal employment varies to an even larger extent at the country level. In 18 out of 31 countries and territories with data, female informal employment rate is higher than male informal employment rate, with gender gaps ranging from 14.3 percentage points skewed towards women, to 10.4 percentage points towards men (Figure 3.9).

Persons with disabilities, migrants, youth and older persons are overrepresented in the informal economy. According to data from 12 Asia-Pacific countries and territories, women with disabilities are more likely to work in the informal economy, if they are at all employed.[78] Women migrants are commonly concentrated in the informal sector of the economy, particularly in care work (including domestic workers).[79] Over the life course, the exposure to informality follows a U-shaped curve, with young people aged 15–24 and older workers aged over 65 being the most likely to be in informal employment, while those aged 35–54 are the least likely. Among younger and older workers in Asia and the Pacific, 8 in 10 are in informal employment, in contrast to 2 in 3 among prime-age workers (aged 24–54). While the share of men in informality is consistently higher across age groups, the gender gaps narrow significantly over the life-course, from a gap of 8 percentage points for the 15–24 age group to 2 percentage points for those aged 65 and over.[80]

78   ESCAP, *Disability at a Glance 2021: The Shaping of Disability-inclusive Employment in Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2021).

79   ILO, "Protecting migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic: Recommendations for Policy-makers and Constituents", policy brief (Geneva, 2020).; UN-Women, *Women migrant workers' journey through the margins* (New York, 2016).

80   ILO, *Men and women in the informal economy: A statistical update* (Geneva, 2023). The figures cited in the source are based on data for 27 countries in Asia and the Pacific.

FIGURE 3.9 Gender gap (percentage point difference) in informal employment rates in total employment, latest year

Country	Value
Afghanistan (2021)	14.3
Türkiye (2022)	12.1
Marshall Islands (2021)	10.4
Pakistan (2021)	9.6
Nepal (2017)	9.3
Republic of Korea (2019)	7.4
Maldives (2019)	6.8
Myanmar (2020)	5.8
Timor-Leste (2021)	5
Lao People's Democratic Republic (2017)	4.6
Armenia (2021)	4.3
India (2022)	3.1
Indonesia (2022)	2.8
Bangladesh (2017)	2.7
Vanuatu (2019)	2.6
Cook Islands (2019)	1.9
Thailand (2018)	1.1
Australia (2021)	0.7
Tonga (2021)	-0.2
Cambodia (2019)	-0.8
Tuvalu (2022)	-2.1
Georgia (2020)	-2.7
Fiji (2016)	-3.2
Kyrgyzstan (2021)	-3.3
Nauru (2021)	-4.3
Viet Nam (2022)	-4.7
Samoa (2017)	-5.9
Mongolia (2022)	-8.3
Kiribati (2020)	-9.2
Brunei Darussalam (2021)	-9.4
Sri Lanka (2020)	-10.4

PERCENTAGE

Source: ESCAP SDG Gateway. Gender gap in Informal employment in total employment. ESCAP elaboration (difference female - male informal employment, percentage of employment), latest year. (Accessed 14 June 2024).

The number of women in informal employment declined in Asia and the Pacific during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic but has since increased to surpass the pre-pandemic level. In 2020, the number of informally employed women declined by 5.4 per cent in comparison to 2019, while the number of male informal workers declined by 2.5 per cent according to analysis by the ILO. This is largely a result of informal workers losing their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic, when they were left more unprotected by labour laws and wage subsidies in comparison to formal sector workers. Female informal workers were hit harder and since 2021, the number of female informal workers has grown and surpassed the pre-pandemic (2019) level.[81]

Women are overrepresented in vulnerable employment, defined as own-account workers and contributing family workers,[82] in 26 out 47 countries and territories with available data.[83] The two categories included in vulnerable employment – own-account work (which to a large extent is comprised of subsistence activities) and contributing family work (which is always informal) together accounted for over 40 per cent of the region's labour force in 2022.[84] Previous research suggests that the difference between men and women is shaped by the gender differentiated experiences of marriage and parenthood, with married women and mothers being more likely to be in vulnerable employment. In particular, gender-biased norms that elevate

81 ILO, *Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2022: Rethinking sectoral strategies for a human-centred future of work* (Geneva, 2022).

82 Own-account workers work for themselves without regular employees and are personally liable for expenses and losses. Contributing family workers work without pay within a family unit. See *ILO classification manual* (Geneva, 2023). Available at https://www.ilo.org/publications/international-classification-status-employment-icse-18-manual.

83 ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicators by theme: Employment by status, Vulnerable employment" (percentage of total employment). Available at https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/ (accessed on 18 June 2024).

84 ILO, *Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2024: Promoting decent work and social justice to manage ageing societies* (Geneva, 2024). See ILO regional grouping for Asia and the Pacific in Annex 2.

women's roles as caregivers over their roles as wage earners have been found to underlie women's overrepresentation as own-account workers and contributing family workers. [85]

The informality and vulnerability women experience in the labour market in Asia and the Pacific are also defined by their concentration in sectors often associated with poor working conditions, such as agriculture, manufacturing and retail trade and accommodation. For instance, 30 per cent of women across the region, and as many as 57 per cent in Southern Asia [86] work in agriculture, a broad sector rated as having the lowest work quality on all measures. [87] An additional 40 per cent of women's employment is located in the broad sectors of manufacturing (18 per cent) and retail trade and accommodation (22 per cent) (which includes accommodation and food service activities), where working conditions are often below expectations and associated with lower pay and high levels of informality. [88] Women dominate the region's seafood processing sector and as domestic workers—two areas of work where working conditions are generally unsatisfactory. [89] These sectors are among the primary sectors of employment for women migrant workers, [90] resulting in them being particularly exposed to informality. Within each sector, women tend to be more disadvantaged compared to men in terms of the specific roles and tasks they undertake along the value chain. For example, in the fisheries and aquaculture sector, several studies suggest that men dominate offshore and high-value fisheries, while women participate more in the harvesting and gleaning of shellfish and invertebrates. Women tend to trade in medium- to low-value species and in smaller volumes compared to men, frequently excluded from the most lucrative value chains. Despite women accounting for a large proportion of workers in the processing node of fisheries and aquaculture value chains, they are overrepresented among seasonal or part-time workers. They are often paid less than men for the same activity, and largely excluded from middle and senior-management positions. [91]

3.3.3 Violence and harassment in the world of work

Violence and harassment at work is a prevalent issue in Asia and the Pacific. Recent survey data covering 24 Asia-Pacific countries shows that one in five workers have experienced some form of violence and harassment at work – including physical, psychological and sexual violence and harassment. [92] The reporting rate is higher among men than among women (20.3 per cent of men in comparison to 17.1 per cent of women). The forms of violence and harassment experienced by women and men at work are different. Women are more likely to report having experienced sexual violence and harassment (5.6 per cent of women compared to 5.0 per cent of men), while a higher share of men report having experienced physical violence and harassment (9.1 per cent of men and 5.8 per cent of women), as well as psychological violence (14.6 per cent of men and 13.9 per cent of women) at work in the region. [93] Violence and harassment occur in a variety of settings within workplaces and can occur in the wider world of work, such as during the commute, at work-related events or online. Domestic violence can also spill over and have an impact in the workplace (see Chapter 4 for a broader discussion on violence and harassment). [94]

The risk of experiencing violence and harassment at work is also associated with age, migrant status and informality. In comparison to young men or older women, young women face a higher risk of work-related psychological and sexual violence and harassment. Among the Asia-Pacific countries with data, 22.6 per cent of young women (aged 15 to 24) reported having experienced some or multiple forms of work-related violence and harassment within the past five years, in comparison to 15.8 per cent among young men and 4.6 per cent among women aged over 55. In particular, in comparison to young men, young women face a higher risk of work-related psychological and sexual violence and harassment. Women migrants are among the groups facing an elevated risk of experiencing violence and harassment at work, with 20.1 per cent of women migrants in the region,

85   Maria C. Lo Bue and others, "Gender and vulnerable employment in the developing world: Evidence from global microdata," *World Development*, vol. 159 (November 2022). Available at https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X22002005.

86   See Annex 2 for a list of countries included in the ILO's subregional grouping.

87   ILO, *Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2022: Rethinking sectoral strategies for a human-centred future of work* (Geneva, 2022).

88   ILO and ADB, *Where women work in Asia and the Pacific: Implications for policies, equity and inclusive growth* (Bangkok, 2023).

89   ILO, *Ship to Shore Rights South East Asia: Gender equality and women's empowerment strategy* (Geneva, 2022) and ILO, *Making decent work a reality for domestic workers Progress and prospects in Asia and the Pacific ten years after the adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)* (Geneva, 2021).

90   UN-Women and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), *Women Migrant Workers in the ASEAN Economic Community* (New York, 2017).

91   Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), *The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems* (Rome, 2023).

92   Lloyd's Register Foundation World Risk Poll 2021, as cited in ILO, *Experiences of violence and harassment at work: A global first survey* (Geneva, 2022).

93   ILO, *Experiences of violence and harassment at work: A global first survey* (Geneva, 2022).

94   UN-Women and ILO, *Handbook: Addressing violence and harassment against women in the world of work* (Geneva, 2019).

compared to 14.2 per cent of women non-migrants, reporting having experienced work-related violence and harassment within the past five years. Work-related sexual and psychological violence and harassment are particularly a threat to women migrants.[95] Workers in the informal economy are also especially vulnerable in the face of violence and harassment, as are part-time or temporary workers.[96]

Addressing violence and harassment at work is an integral part to the broader efforts of gender-based violence prevention and response. Ensuring that all workers are free from violence and harassment requires concerted efforts among governments, employers, workers and society at large. Specifically, it requires addressing the gender inequalities and social norms that often underpin violence and harassment; strengthening laws and policies that define, prohibit and prevent violence in the world of work; increasing institutional capacity and putting in place adequate prevention, remedial and accountability mechanisms; strengthening the knowledge base and raising awareness through data collection efforts, campaigns and trainings targeting employers, workers and the public.[97] Action needs to address the particular vulnerability of young women, women migrants and informal workers.

At the international level, the ILO's recent C190 - Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) is the first international treaty establishing the right of everyone to a world of work free of violence and harassment. It requires governments to adopt necessary laws and policies to prevent and address violence and harassment at work. In the Asia-Pacific region, only **Australia** (entering into force in 2024), **Fiji** (2020), **Papua New Guinea** (entering into force in 2024), and **the Philippines** (entering into force in 2025) have ratified the convention to date.[98] Trade unions and women's organizations in the region have been at the forefront of advocating for governments to ratify and implement the convention, for example through the ILO-led 'Ratify C190 Campaign'.[99]

3.3.4 Work-related social protection

The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the importance of addressing shortfalls in social protection. A large number of workers in Asia and the Pacific find themselves without income in the face of job losses and illness. Major trends facing the region, such as growing flows of migration, urbanization, climate change and more frequent disasters, technological transformation, and population ageing are also increasing the need for effective social protection mechanisms to help workers cope with work-related contingencies.[100] With other types of social protection covered by Chapter 2, this section briefly discusses three types of employment-related social protection benefits: unemployment protection, sickness benefits and injury protection.

While the extent of gender gaps in effective coverage are unclear due to a lack of sex-disaggregated data, most workers in the region do not benefit from protection against work-related contingencies. As with other types of social protection that are mainly funded through work-related contributory schemes (see Chapter 2), protection in the event of unemployment, sickness or injury is typically limited to formal sector workers.[101] Furthermore, non-contributory schemes only cover a small proportion of the labour force.[102] Without access to contributory or non-contributory schemes, protection against unemployment, sickness or injury remain largely out of reach for a large proportion of workers in the informal economy and non-standard forms of employment. This includes many women in the region who are migrant workers, domestic workers, self-employed, workers in micro- and small-sized enterprises, home-based workers or contributing family workers.[103] Digital platform workers is another category of workers that generally lack protection form work-related contingencies (see Box 3.3).[104]

95   ILO, *Experiences of violence and harassment at work: A global first survey* (Geneva, 2022).

96   UN-Women and ILO, *Handbook: Addressing violence and harassment against women in the world of work* (New York, 2019). See also: ILO, *Recommendation concerning the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work (No. 206)*. Available at https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO (accessed on 2 August 2024).

97   Ibid.

98   ILO, *Ratifications of C190 - Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190)*. Available at https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:11300:0::NO:11300:P11300_INSTRUMENT_ID:3999810 (accessed on 2 August 2024).

99   See for instance ITUC-AP's Ratify C190! Campaign https://www.ituc-ap.org/campaigns/ratify-c190.

100   ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Regional companion report for Asia and the Pacific* (Geneva, 2021).

101   Ibid.

102   Non-contributory schemes for unemployment, illness, or work injury protection legally cover less than 1 per cent of the persons in the labour force. World Social Protection Database.

103   ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Regional companion report for Asia and the Pacific* (Geneva, 2021).

104   Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), *Guidelines on Providing Social Protection to Digital Platform Workers* (Kuala Lumpur, 2021). https://www.apec.org/docs/default-source/publications/2021/12/guidelines-on-providing-social-protection-to-digital-platform-workers/221_hrd_guidelines-on-providing-social-protection-to-digital-platform-workers.pdf?sfvrsn=9c0b254_2.

Unemployment protection in Asia and the Pacific is limited to a small proportion of the region's workers. For the region overall, only 13.5 per cent of those who are unemployed receive support through unemployment schemes in **South and South-West Asia** (0.5 per cent) and **South-East Asia** (10.6 per cent).[105] There has been a lack of sex-disaggregated data on the proportion of unemployed women and men who receive cash benefits.

Most workers in Asia and the Pacific are not legally covered by work-related injury insurance, with only 30.5 per cent of workers covered. The share of workers protected is particularly low in **South and South-West Asia** (12.5 per cent).[106] Similar to unemployment protection, there isn't sufficient sex-disaggregated data to understand the gender difference in access to work-related injury insurance.

Social protection systems in Asia and the Pacific tend to be gender blind in that they do not take the labour market disadvantages faced by women into account. For example, women's lower labour force participation, earnings, and overrepresentation in part-time and vulnerable employment, means that they have less opportunities to regularly contribute to social protection schemes, resulting in lower coverage. Furthermore, when the levels of income replacement support are based on past earnings, gender pay gaps may be replicated. Making the protections against work-related contingencies, such as those covering unemployment, illness and injury, more gender-responsive can contribute towards mitigating gender inequalities in the world of work instead of exacerbating them.[107]

BOX 3.3 **Increasing access to social protection and decent work for digital labour platform workers**

Over the past decade, the emergence of digital labour platforms has become a distinctive feature of the digital economy and transformed the world of work. Such platforms can be broadly classified into two categories: online web-based platforms, where tasks are performed online or remotely by a crowd or individual workers, and location-based platforms, where tasks are performed at a specified physical location by individuals, such as taxi, delivery and domestic work services. Digital labour platforms create income-generating opportunities, including providing an avenue for some workers to complement their incomes from low-paying and seasonal jobs. Notably, the flexibility in working location and time can benefit women with heavy unpaid care and domestic work responsibilities, persons with disabilities, migrants and other groups in vulnerable situations.[1]

An ILO study in 2021 suggested that, globally, the majority of workers on digital labour platforms were below the age of 35 years and highly educated, especially in developing countries. Approximately 40 per cent of workers on online web-based platforms were women, while they represented fewer than 10 per cent of workers in app-based taxi and delivery sectors. Gender-based occupational segregation was reproduced on freelance platforms, a major type of online web-based platforms. Women were more likely to perform tasks related to business services; professional services such as in the legal field; translation, writing and editing; and sales and marketing compared to men. The proportion of women engaged in tasks related to technology and data analytics (8 per cent and 22 per cent respectively) was lower than that of men (32 per cent and 29 per cent respectively).[2]

Despite the potential of digital labour platforms to increase employment opportunities for women and other people in vulnerable situations, significant challenges remain. Jobs created by digital labour platforms do not entail direct employment. Workers on these platforms are often classified as self-employed or independent contractors.[3] This means digital labour platform workers could encounter difficulties in accessing regular work and income, decent working conditions and, critically, social protection. The ILO study revealed

1   ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook 2021: The Role of Digital Labour Platforms in Transforming the World of Work* (Geneva, 2021).
2   Ibid.
3   ESCAP, *The Workforce We Need: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2022) and United Nations DESA, "Digitally enabled new forms of work and policy implications for labour regulation frameworks and social protection systems", policy brief (New York, 2021).

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105 ESCAP elaboration based on ILO estimates, 2024; World Social Protection Database, based on the Social Security Inquiry; ISSA Social Security Programs Throughout the World; ILOSTAT; national sources (accessed on 22 July 2024). Regional and subregional aggregates are weighted by population.
106 Ibid.
107 ESCAP, *How to Design Gender-Sensitive Social Protection Systems* (United Nations publication, 2021).

BOX 3.3 **Increasing access to social protection and decent work for digital labour platform workers** *(continued)*

that only a small proportion of online web-based platform workers were covered by social protection programmes, and the coverage was lower among women compared to men. About 40 per cent of survey respondents reported having health insurance (39 per cent of women and 42 per cent of men). Less than 20 per cent of respondents had employment injury insurance (11 per cent of women and 18 per cent of men), unemployment insurance (10 per cent of women and 13 per cent of women), disability insurance (11 per cent of women and 12 per cent of men) and old-age pension (18 per cent of women and 21 per cent of men). Social protection coverage, when available, is often provided through workers' past or current employment, or indirectly through tax-financed programmes and family members.[4]

Increasing social protection for digital labour platform and other self-employed workers is a policy priority for many countries. Some promising solutions include adapting national social protection policies to extend coverage; facilitating registration and contribution payment; enhancing data sharing between workers, platforms and authorities; and increasing portability and transferability among schemes and employers.[5] For example, in **India**, the Government legislated the definition of platform and gig workers, their social protection entitlements and financing mechanisms under the Code of Social Security (2020).[6] In **Indonesia**, the share of women in the app-based taxi sector was 13 per cent, relatively higher than that in other countries included in the ILO study.[7] The government agency for social security, in collaboration with the finance sector, simplified registration and contribution payment and extended the coverage of work injury and death benefits to drivers on Gojek, the largest ride-hailing on-demand platform in Indonesia. Gojek drivers can register online with the agency, and social security contributions are drawn directly from their driver accounts.[8]

Innovative approaches to promoting decent work for digital labour platform workers are likely to arise from social dialogue. In the **Republic of Korea**, the Economic, Social and Labour Council, a presidential advisory body, provides a platform for dialogue among representatives of workers, employers and the Government. The Council has established several committees to address issues concerning digital labour platforms. The Committee on the Digital Transformation and Future of Work, for example, issued a code of conduct in 2020, outlining guidelines for fair contract terms between workers and platform companies. The code of conduct covers various aspects, such as non-discrimination, payment method, fees, tax, performance assessment and dispute settlement.[9]

To enhance access to social protection and decent work for workers on digital labour platforms, it is essential to first review national classification systems to clarify their employment status and extend social protection coverage to all platform workers. Equally important is to facilitate social dialogue among workers, employers, digital labour platforms and other stakeholders to identify solutions that address challenges faced by workers in vulnerable situations. Particular efforts should be directed towards tackling gender-related issues, such as women's unequal participation in digital labour platforms and occupational segregation.

4   ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook 2021: The Role of Digital Labour Platforms in Transforming the World of Work* (Geneva, 2021).
5   ESCAP, "Leveraging digital innovation for inclusive and sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific", social development working paper (Bangkok, 2023).
6   International Social Security Association (ISSA), "Platform workers and social protection International development", blog, 6 June 2024. Available at https://www.issa.int/analysis/platform-workers-and-social-protection-international-developments (accessed on 6 August 2024).
7   ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook 2021: The Role of Digital Labour Platforms in Transforming the World of Work* (Geneva, 2021).
8   ILO, ISSA and OECD, "Providing adequate and sustainable social protection for workers in the gig and platform economy", technical paper prepared for the 1st meeting of the Employment Working Group under Indian presidency (Geneva and Paris, 2023)and ILO, *Innovative Approaches For Ensuring Universal Social protection For The Future Of Work* (Geneva, 2018).
9   ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook 2021: The Role of Digital Labour Platforms in Transforming the World of Work* (Geneva, 2021).

3.3.5 Social dialogue and representation

When being gender-inclusive, social dialogue and collective bargaining can be an effective process for the advancement of gender equality in the workplace and beyond. For example, social dialogue and collective bargaining can more often cover topics central to advancing gender equality in the world of work, such as the promotion of equal access to jobs and skills, fair wages and equal pay for work of equal value, the expansion of parental leave, and the prevention of and protection against violence and sexual harassment.[108] The inclusion of women in collective negotiation processes is critical to ensuring that their priorities and concerns are reflected and that the outcomes of collective negotiations benefit workers of all genders.[109] Furthermore, more gender-proportional representation and participation in social dialogue structures and processes can contribute to strengthening the legitimacy and effectiveness of social dialogues.[110]

Women are often underrepresented both in the leadership of workers' and employers' organizations, and in national social dialogue institutions. In the case of the latter, data from 2018 shows that women's representation in national social dialogue institutions, such as economic and social councils and labour advisory boards, ranges from 20 to 35 per cent.[111] In the case of workers' organizations, although women are surpassing men in terms of union membership,[112] they comprise only 28 per cent of members in the highest decision-making bodies of trade unions at the global level. In Asia and the Pacific, previous reports have noted that on average 20 per cent of trade unions' wage negotiation team members are women, compared to 30 per cent globally.[113] As a response, women in some countries in Asia and the Pacific, including **China, India and the Republic of Korea**, have set up women-only networks or unions to counter traditionally male dominated union leaderships.[114] In the case of employers' organizations, a 2023 survey showed that less than a third of employers' organizations have gender-balanced (with women's representation at 40 to 60 per cent) management structures, with a similar proportion reporting having 10 per cent or less

women managers. A further 10 per cent of surveyed employers' organizations reported having no female manager at all.[115] Additionally, earlier surveys indicate that none of the 13 surveyed employer's organizations in Asia and the Pacific had a female chair.[116]

To further increase the role of social dialogue and collective bargaining in addressing gender inequalities in the world of work, there is a need to strengthen the participation and representation of women among the leaderships of employers' and workers' organizations, governments, as well as in social dialogue processes and structures, including tripartite bodies. Proactive measures such as quota policies and the establishment of women's committees can contribute to this aim.[117]

Efforts to engage women informal workers and increase their access to social dialogue mechanisms is also a longstanding need. Social dialogue actors such as trade unions are recognizing this need and are, for example, being increasingly active in reaching out to informal workers and forming partnerships with informal women workers' and self-employed women's associations. Nevertheless, informal workers' limited access to social dialogue mechanisms remains a key challenge that requires further policy attention.[118]

3.4 THE CARE ECONOMY

The care economy comprises the care activities and services, paid and unpaid, that underpin human survival, welfare and reproduction. Services performed in the care economy can include both direct, face-to-face, personal care, such as the provision of childcare and care for persons with disabilities, older persons, sick persons or others with care and support needs, as well as indirect care including cooking, cleaning, gardening and other activities that ensure a safe and healthy living environment.[119] In addition to services, the care economy also includes policies and regulatory frameworks, infrastructure, institutions, financing mechanisms, and social norms that influence and govern care and support throughout the life-course.[120]

108 ILO, "The contribution of social dialogue to gender equality", thematic brief (Geneva, 2020).

109 ILO, *A Quantum Leap for Gender Equality: For a Better Future of Work For All* (Geneva, 2019).

110 ILO, "The contribution of social dialogue to gender equality", Global Deal thematic brief (Geneva, 2020).

111 ILO, *Promising practices, experiences and lessons learned in eliminating gender inequality in the garment sector in Asia* (Geneva, 2022). An exception that is noted is Samoa, where the national social dialogue mechanism is at or near parity; Melisa R. Serrano and Verna Dinah Q. Vijar, *Transformative Strategies Towards Gender Equality in Trade Unions: A Handbook*, Fredrich Ebert Stiftung (Kathmandu, 2022).

112 ILO, "Social dialogue report 2022", report (Geneva, 2022).

113 King (2018) as cited in ILO, *Organizing Women Migrant Workers: Manual for Trade Unionists in ASEAN* (Geneva, 2021).

114 ILO, "Social dialogue report 2022", report (Geneva, 2022).

115 ILO and IOE, *Women in Business: How Employer and Business Membership Organizations Drive Gender Equality* (Geneva, 2024).

116 ILO, Bureau for Employers' Activities (ACT/EMP), "A global snapshot: Women leaders and managers in employers' organizations", working paper; No. 17 (Geneva, 2017).

117 ILO, *A Quantum Leap for Gender Equality: For a Better Future of Work For All* (Geneva, 2019).

118 ILO, "The contribution of social dialogue to gender equality", Global Deal thematic brief (Geneva, 2020).

119 ILO, *From Global Care Crisis to Quality Care at Home: The Case for Including Domestic Workers in Care Policies and Ensuring Their Rights at Work* (Geneva, 2023).

120 ILO, "Resolution concerning decent work and care in the economy", ILC 112/ Resolution V (Geneva, 2023).

Both within and outside households, care activities and services are overwhelmingly undertaken by women. Yet, women's disproportionate contributions in sustaining our societies and economies remain largely invisible and not accounted for in traditional macroeconomic metrics, such as GDP. If included, conservative estimates show that the unpaid care and domestic work undertaken by women in Asia and the Pacific would add USD 3.8 trillion to the regional GDP, equivalent to 15 per cent of the total regional GDP in 2016.[121] Unpaid care and domestic work, mostly carried out by women and girls, acts to compensate for shortfalls in public expenditure on care infrastructure and services. In effect, unpaid care and domestic work is a transfer of resources from women and girls (and to a much lesser extent from men and boys) to the economies and societies that benefit from and depend on care services being provided.[122]

In recent years, policy frameworks for the care economy have gained significant attention. For example, ILO's 5R Framework for Decent Care Work emphasizes the need to recognize, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work; reward care workers with more and decent work; and guarantee representation, social dialogue, and collective bargaining for care workers.[123] ESCAP's Model Framework for Policy Action on the Care Economy calls for investments across four key policy categories – care infrastructure, care-related social protections, care services, and employment-related care policies. The framework also emphasizes foundational care principles, the need for enabling political economy factors, and the importance of levers of change.[124] Moreover, collaborative initiatives and dialogues aimed at strengthening the care economy have emerged, exemplified by the establishment of the Global Alliance on Care, the International Labour Conference's General Discussion on Care Work and the Care Economy held in June 2024 and the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening the Care Economy and Fostering Resilience Towards the Post-2025 ASEAN Community.

3.4.1 Unpaid care and domestic work

Unpaid care and domestic work are of large value to recipients, providers and societies, complementing and supplementing paid care work in sustaining human, economic and environmental well-being.

Often provided by the family and social networks, unpaid care and domestic work encompass unpaid domestic services for own use within households, unpaid care services to persons of own households and unpaid community or voluntary services.[125] Such work is not equitably shared between the genders, raising a significant barrier to women's economic empowerment.[126]

The disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work performed by women has been one of the biggest contributing factors to the persistent gender inequalities in the region's labour market. The unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work between women and men, as well as between the household, the State and the markets, is itself a result of entrenched gender roles and norms surrounding care and domestic responsibilities and the value of work. Recent analysis published by UNDP has noted a positive correlation between the prevalence of biased gender social norms and the female to male ratios of time spent on unpaid care and domestic work.[127] The importance of addressing unpaid care and domestic work is reflected in SDG 5, wherein Target 5.4 calls to "*recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies.*"

Official SDG data on unpaid care and domestic work based on time-use surveys is only available for 15 ESCAP members and associate members. Despite data constraints, the evidence that does exist shows extreme gender difference between the amount of time spent by women and by men on unpaid care and domestic work across countries and territories. **Among most ESCAP members and associate members (13 out of 15) with data, the time women and girls (aged 15 years and above) spend on unpaid care and domestic work is two to five times more than men.** The gender difference is smaller in two countries, Australia and Lao People's Democratic Republic, where women and girls still bear disproportionate unpaid care and domestic work (Figure 3.10).[128] Such gender difference in unpaid labour division begins at a rather young age. In South Asia,[129] for example, girls aged 5–14 spend twice the amount of time on unpaid care and domestic work than boys in the same age.[130] For women and girls, the consequent time poverty continues to have a broad range of implications on

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121 ESCAP, "Unpaid work in Asia and the Pacific", Social Development Working Paper No. 2019/02 (Bangkok, 2019) and Lola Woetzel and others, "The power of parity: Advancing women's equality in Asia Pacific", McKinzey Global Institute, report (New York, 2018). These figures are calculated by multiplying the time spent on unpaid work with the hourly wage (opportunity cost approach).

122 ILO, "Care Work and Care Jobs: For the future of decent work", report (Geneva, 2018).

123 Ibid.

124 ESCAP, *How to Invest in the Care Economy: A Primer* (United Nations publication, 2022).

125 Ibid.

126 ILO, "Resolution concerning decent work and care in the economy", ILC 112/ Resolution V (Geneva, 2023).

127 UNDP, *Breaking Down Gender Biases: Shifting social norms towards gender equality* (New York, 2023).

128 ESCAP elaboration based on ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Time spent on unpaid domestic chores and care work", female and male 15+, percentage of time in a day, most recent year (accessed on 14 June 2024).

129 See UNICEF's subregional grouping in Annex 2.

130 OECD, *Enabling Women's Economic Empowerment: New Approaches to Unpaid Care Work in Developing Countries* (Paris, 2019).

FIGURE 3.10 **Time spent on unpaid domestic chores and care work, female-to-male ratio, most recent year**
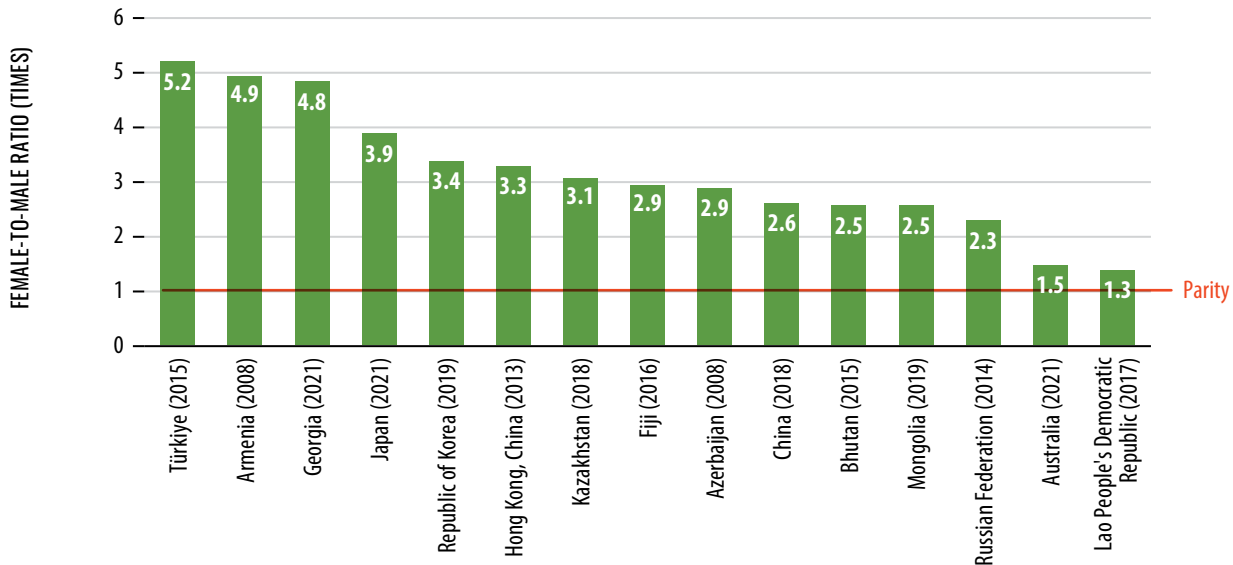
Source: ESCAP elaboration based on ESCAP SDG Gateway. *Time spent on unpaid domestic chores and care work (% of time in a day, total female and male aged 15+, most recent year)* (Accessed 14 June 2024).

their physical and mental well-being, and their ability to participate in education, economic, social, and political life on an equal footing with men and boys. This in turn contributes to their relative disadvantages in terms of income, career advancement, leadership and decision-making.

While men in many countries are taking on an increasing amount of childcare and domestic work, the gender gaps in time use are not closing,[131] **but instead widened during the COVID-19 pandemic.** As a result of school closures, working-from-home arrangements, interruption of care facilities and the need to care for sick family members, unpaid care and domestic work increased during the pandemic, especially for women. In a survey conducted by UN-Women during the pandemic in 10 Asia-Pacific countries, 63 per cent of women compared to 59 per cent of men reported that the time spent on unpaid care and domestic work had increased.[132] While the pandemic increased unpaid care and domestic work and exacerbated inequalities, a silver lining emerged as it increased spotlight on the centrality and importance of care work in human life and the market economy, and thus the need for care-sensitive and gender-differentiated policy action.[133]

Given the ageing of populations in Asia and the Pacific, the demand for care will continue to increase. This will most likely intensify the disproportionate unpaid care work performed by women and girls unless countries in the region increase investments

to redistribute care responsibilities from the family to the State and the market; strengthen social protection taking into account the care needs and implications of unpaid care work on women and girls; promote decent work in the paid care sector, which will in turn result in quality care services and job creation; and transform social norms and practices around the division of unpaid care and domestic work between women and men through policy incentives and socialization.[134]

3.4.2 Paid care services and decent work

Care services can be provided by the State, households, the market economy or the not-for-profit sector. Apart from the unpaid services primarily carried out by women and girls within households, which constitute a large proportion of the care economy, paid care services are provided by a wide range of personal service workers, such as nurses, doctors, teachers, personal care workers and domestic workers, who are also predominantly women. Part of the solution to the region's care deficit relies on quality paid care services, many of which are provided by domestic workers. Ensuring that care workers, especially domestic workers – many of whom are also migrant workers — and community health and care workers, are adequately represented and rewarded for their indispensable contributions to societies and economies, and have access to decent work, is as essential for the quality of care services, as it is for their own well-being.[135]

131 UNDP, *Breaking Down Gender Biases: Shifting Social Norms Towards Gender Equality* (New York, 2023).
132 UN-Women, "Unlocking the lockdown: the gendered effects of COVID-19 on achieving the SDGs in Asia and the Pacific", survey report (Bangkok, 2020).
133 ESCAP, *COVID-19 and the Unpaid Care Economy in Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2021).
134 Ibid.
135 UN-Women, *A toolkit on paid and unpaid care work: From 3Rs to 5Rs* (New York, 2022).

With over half of the world's domestic workers, or an estimated 38.3 million, including 22 million in China alone, Asia and the Pacific is the world's largest employer of domestic workers. The majority of the region's domestic workers, as in other parts of the world, are women and girls (78.4 per cent). As an exception, in Southern Asia, the proportion of male domestic workers is particularly high (42.6 per cent). Domestic work represents a far more important source of employment for women than for men, including in Southern Asia. It accounts for 4.4 per cent of female employment in the Asia-Pacific region, in contrast to only 0.7 per cent of male employment. While migrant workers only make up a relatively small share (less than 8 per cent) of domestic workers in Eastern Asia and Southern Asia, migrants constitute about a quarter of domestic workers in South-Eastern Asia and the Pacific. In most parts of the region, domestic work remains an important source of employment for migrant workers. In South-East Asia and Eastern Asia, for instance, one in five migrant workers are domestic workers.[136] The prevalence of domestic work is found to be higher in countries where income inequalities are larger. In such circumstances, more people are willing to accept relatively low wages and high levels of informality which lead to weaker compliance with legal responsibilities by employers.[137] This makes domestic workers more affordable, and also more vulnerable.

Decent work is not a reality for a significant number of domestic workers. The majority of domestic workers are engaged in informal employment, hired directly by households or through a service provider. In Asia and the Pacific, 61 per cent of domestic workers are not at all protected by national labour legislation. The rest are covered, at least in part, by the general labour laws, subordinate regulations, specific labour laws or state legal provisions in federal countries. This means that the majority of domestic workers are excluded from legal entitlements related to working time, paid leave and minimum wage. Domestic workers are pronouncedly excluded from social protection, particularly contributory schemes. Only 12 countries in the Asia-Pacific region[138] legally cover domestic workers in at least one contributory social protection scheme, covering a mere 27.9 per cent of all domestic workers in the

region. While many female domestic workers are in reproductive age, only 19 per cent of them have access to paid maternity leave and 18 per cent are entitled to maternity cash benefits.[139] The high level of informality also profoundly constrains domestic workers' ability to associate and participate in social dialogues, further limiting their ability to protect their own rights and benefits through collective bargaining. For instance, female domestic workers in the region earn just 58 per cent of the average wage of other employees, also significantly less than male domestic workers (who earn 75.6 per cent of the average wage of other employees). Several countries in the region have set examples of extending some legal protection to domestic workers, such as minimum wage guarantees in **India, Pakistan and Timor-Leste**.[140]

The lack of legal protection also makes domestic workers vulnerable to workplace hazards and violence. Domestic workers are often exposed to chemical, ergonomic and physical hazards. Occupational safety and health (OSH) legislations in most countries exclude domestic workers, explicitly or inexplicitly. They are also particularly vulnerable to physical, psychological and sexual abuse, harassment and violence at work, given the private and isolated nature of their workplace and the power imbalance between domestic workers and their employers. Moreover, child labour is a common concern in the domestic work sector. ILO and UNICEF estimate that globally there are 7.1 million children aged between 5 and 17 years working as domestic workers, with 61 per cent being girls[141] who are even more vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and violence. In the face of these challenges, several countries have made efforts to improve the situation of domestic workers. In the Punjab Province of **Pakistan**, employers of domestic workers are required by law to comply with the general OSH provisions. Additionally, in 2022 the country amended the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act to cover domestic workers.[142] In **Indonesia**, the law against domestic violence recognizes live-in domestic workers as members of the household for which they work and thus legally protected against physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence within the household.[143]

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136 ILO, *Making Decent Work a Reality for Domestic Workers: Progress and Prospects Ten Years after the Adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)* (Geneva, 2021).

137 Ibid.

138 See ILO regional grouping for Asia and the Pacific in Annex 2.

139 ILO, *Making Decent Work a Reality for Domestic Workers: Progress and Prospects Ten Years after the Adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)* (Geneva, 2021).

140 National reports on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action submitted by respective countries. Available at: https://www.asiapacificgender.org/node/244 (accessed on 5 August 2024).

141 ILO and UNICEF, *Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020, Trends and the Road Forward*. (Geneva, 2021).

142 Pakistan, Ministry of Human Rights, *National Report on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, (Islamabad, 2024). Available at https://www.asiapacificgender.org/node/244.

143 ILO, *Making Decent Work a Reality for Domestic Workers: Progress and Prospects Ten Years after the Adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)* (Geneva, 2021).

BOX 3.4   Extending labour law protections to domestic workers in Viet Nam

Viet Nam has taken important legal steps towards ensuring decent work for domestic workers in recent years. Since 2021, the employment of domestic workers in Viet Nam is regulated by written employment contracts that set minimum standards on working time and rest. It is the only country in Asia and the Pacific where domestic workers are entitled to the same minimum wage as other workers. Additionally, Viet Nam has also expressed its commitment to ratifying the ILO Convention on Domestic Workers (C.189) by 2026.[1]

The adoption of a new Labor Law in November 2019, along with a subsidiary Decree in December 2020, serves as an initial measure towards formalizing a sector that is dominated by women. The 2019 Labour Code and its subsidiary Decree 145/2020/ND-CP set formal standards for domestic work, such as the formalization of a written contract, as well as working hours limits and rest time.[2] Specifically, overtime is only permitted with both domestic worker and employer consent, and without exceeding 48 hours per week. Similarly, hours of work and rest shall be agreed by both parties, provided that the domestic worker has at least eight hours of rest. Moreover, domestic workers are entitled to 24 consecutive hours of weekly rest, according to article 111(1) of the Labour Code. In-kind payments are also considered by the legislation that sets a limit to 50 per cent of the monthly wage, with the requirement of a mandatory agreement by the two parties. Finally, domestic workers are entitled to a minimum wage rate at least equal to that fixed by the government for other workers.[3] Viet Nam's efforts to ensure decent work not only acknowledge the crucial role of domestic workers in the national economy, but also hold the potential to pave the way for gender equality and women's economic empowerment in the country.

Yet, one of the main challenges in Viet Nam is gaining compliance with the law regarding the protection of domestic workers. While the country has made progress in including domestic workers in its labour laws, there is still a significant gap between the legal protections and the actual experiences of domestic workers, which must be narrowed to fully ensure the well-being and rights of domestic workers.[4]

1   ILO, *Making decent work a reality for domestic workers: Progress and prospects in Asia and the Pacific, ten years after the adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)* (Geneva, 2021).
2   Viet Nam, Decree No. 145/2020/ND-CP – Special provisions for domestic workers at article 89(3) affirmed that working hours and rest periods shall comply with chapter VII of the Labour Code.
3   Viet Nam, Article 89 of Decree No. 145/2020/ND-CP.
4   ILO, "Covered by labour laws, Viet Nam's domestic workers need actual protection", blog, 15 June 2021. Available at https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/covered-labour-laws-viet-nams-domestic-workers-need-actual-protection (accessed on 6 August 2024).

Expanding the paid care sector presents a pathway to meeting the increasing demand for care and supporting women's economic empowerment. Reducing unpaid care and domestic work by redistributing it from households to the paid economy can contribute to expanding women's opportunities to pursue other activities of their choosing. In addition, the ILO has estimated that investing in universal childcare and long-term care services could generate 280 million jobs by 2030, and an additional 19 million jobs by 2035 globally. The vast majority of these jobs would, according to the ILO, be formal jobs going to women.[144] However, countries need to be mindful of reinforcing the feminization of the care sector in the region. According to recently published ILO figures, out of the region's 71 million workers employed in activities related to health, social work

or domestic work, 51 million were women in 2022.[145] Apart from generating jobs, attention also needs to be paid to ensuring that such jobs are subject to decent working conditions and do not further perpetuate or exacerbate women's labour market segregation. An increase in the number of care jobs, if accompanied by higher wages, professional qualification requirements and adequate OSH standards, could contribute to attracting more men and women into the care economy.[146]

3.4.3   Investment in the care economy

To catalyse a broad base of positive changes in the economy, the society and the households requires a holistic vision to invest in the care economy beyond paid care services.

144 ILO, "Care at Work: Investing in care leave and services for a more gender equal world of work", report (Geneva, 2022).
145 ILO, *Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook: Promoting decent work and social justice to manage ageing societies* (Geneva, 2024).
146 ILO, "Care at Work: Investing in care leave and services for a more gender equal world of work", report (Geneva, 2022).

The demand for care is multifaceted and increasing. On average, in Asia and the Pacific,[147] parents are entitled to childcare-related paid leave for 5.3 months, whereas the average starting age of free early childhood care and education (where available) is 4.8 years of age. This leaves an average gap of 4.4 years (or 52.8 months) where parents would require additional support for early childhood care and education.[148] In addition, Asia and the Pacific is home to 697 million persons over the age of 60, a figure that is projected to double by 2050 and reach 1.3 billion.[149] The rapidly ageing populations in many Asia-Pacific countries, coupled with increased life expectancy, are expected to increase old-age care needs across the region. There is also increased demand for care and support services for the region's 750 million persons with disabilities to achieve independent, quality living and participation in the society.[150] It is estimated that the demand for long-term care workers in the region will double to 90 million between 2023 and 2050.[151]

Addressing such multifaceted care demand requires a combination of investments across sectors. Governments need to urgently develop comprehensive and inclusive care policies, particularly in relation to social protection, family friendly policies, and labour market measures. These policies constitute important means to address equity issues surrounding access to care and benefits and addressing the disproportionate impacts of care on different groups, especially women and girls. Governments need to factor care-related considerations into public infrastructure development with a focus on improving accessibility and reducing care burdens. The provision of care services needs to be diversified, with engagement of public, civil society and private service providers. The government is responsible for creating regulatory mechanisms to ensure equity, affordability and quality of care services, as well as decent work for care workers.

Central to these policy actions and investments is a strong gender lens and deliberate gender considerations. In the absence of gender-responsive investment in early childhood care and education, old-age pension, disability allowances, long-term care support, care services, workplace care support, and care-sensitive infrastructure, much of the care work would likely continue to be undertaken by women and girls in the form of unpaid care and domestic work. On the contrary, making investments in the care economy, with the vision to shift gender norms and practices that stereotype women's roles as caregivers within households through legislative reforms, policy incentives, institutional support, public service provision and socialization, offers a critical pathway towards promoting gender equality and women's economic empowerment.[152]

3.5 ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Entrepreneurship is a critical engine for job creation, livelihoods, economic growth and sustainable development. In Asia and the Pacific, where micro, small, or medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) are a major contributor to the region's growth, women own approximately 60 per cent of MSMEs.[153] When women successfully start businesses, they create income for themselves and may also generate employment opportunities and livelihoods for others —especially for other women—as their businesses grow. Therefore, entrepreneurship is an important pathway for women's economic empowerment. The rapid growth of the digital economy provides tremendous opportunities for broadening the scope and markets for businesses, including many owned by women. For example, in China alone, women made up 55 per cent of entrepreneurs in the digital economy.[154] However, in comparison to men, women entrepreneurs often face additional barriers due to the broad and structural gender inequalities that exist in society. For example, women's disproportionate care and domestic work responsibilities, unfavourable regulations and practices, comparatively low asset ownership and access to productive resources, and limited access to finance, markets, entrepreneurial networks and mentors are all additional hurdles faced by women entrepreneurs in Asia and the Pacific as well as other parts of the world.

As a result of these barriers, **women in most Asia-Pacific countries are less likely to own or co-own a business. When they do, their businesses are predominantly micro-sized or informal enterprises.**[155] Across the 21 Asia-Pacific countries with available data, the share of female business owners ranges from 44 per cent to only 2 per cent

147 See ILO regional grouping for Asia and the Pacific in Annex 2.

148 ILO, "Care at Work: Investing in care leave and services for a more gender equal world of work", report (Geneva, 2022).

149 ESCAP, *Asia-Pacific Population and Development Report 2023* Asia-Pacific Population and Development Report 2023 (ST/ESCAP/3112) (United Nations publication, 2023).

150 See ESCAP, "Social Development: Disability-Inclusive Development", web page. Available at https://www.unescap.org/our-work/social-development/disability-inclusive-development#:~:text=In%20Asia%20and%20the%20Pacific,with%20some%20form%20of%20disability (accessed on 6 August 2024).

151 ILO, *Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook: Promoting decent work and social justice to manage ageing societies* (Geneva, 2024).

152 ESCAP, *COVID-19 and the Unpaid Care Economy in Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2021).

153 ADB and UN-Women, "Gender-responsive Procurement in Asia and the Pacific: An opportunity for an equitable economic future" (Manila, 2022).

154 China, National Report on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing, 2024). Available at https://www.asiapacificgender.org/node/244 (accessed on 5 August 2024).

155 ADB and UN-Women, "Gender-responsive Procurement in Asia and the Pacific: An opportunity for an equitable economic future" (Manila, 2022).

BOX 3.5 **Transformational investments in care infrastructure and services in Cambodia**

Cambodia has recently made transformative investments in care infrastructure, as well as in care services for children and older persons. These investments are key steps towards reducing and redistributing unpaid care and domestic work, which contributes to the advancement of women's economic empowerment.

Under the National Strategic Plan for Rural Water Supply Sanitation and Hygiene 2014-2025, the Ministry of Rural Development has invested in care infrastructure by improving access to water and sanitation in rural areas, as well as by rehabilitating rural roads at the provincial, district, commune and village levels. Access to improved sanitation increased from 70.9 in 2017 per cent to 88 per cent in 2021, while the percentage of rural population with access to improved water supply grew from 58.3 per cent in 2017 to 87 per cent in 2021.[1] Improvements in rural road infrastructure have facilitated women's access not only to essential facilities such as health centres, schools and markets, but also to employment opportunities. For instance, it has been reported that unsafe transportation is one of the reasons why Cambodian women have discontinued their factory employment, as it hinders their ability to bring their infants or commute for extended periods, especially if they reside in rural areas.[2]

On the care services side, Cambodia launched an early childhood education programme, as well as the National Ageing Policy and the National Healthcare Policy and Strategy for Older People. The policy concerning children entails expanding early childhood services for children under 6 years old. Furthermore, home-based programmes and community-based childcare have been promoted to provide information and support to parents and caregivers. As for the policy concerning older persons, it aims to provide training to caregivers, incentivize elder care businesses, establish community-based old-age centres, and protect older persons from abuse. For instance, a total of 569 Older People's Associations have been established at the commune (*sangkat*) level throughout the country. The increased provision in care services contributes to shifting the allocation of care work from women and households to the State and/or markets.[3]

Cambodia's strategic investments in care infrastructure and services, together with other national policy actions on the care economy, can help tackle the imbalanced allocation of unpaid care and domestic work responsibilities. Where effective, this can contribute to addressing one of the key barriers to women's economic empowerment and gender equality. Towards this aim, interventions and campaigns that promote behavioural change are complementary and crucial to promoting the redistribution of care responsibilities within households.[4]

1   Cambodia, Ministry of Women's Affairs, *National Report on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (Phnom Penh, 2024). Available at https://www.asiapacificgender.org/node/244.
2   ESCAP, "Valuing and investing in unpaid care and domestic work. Country case study: Cambodia", report (Bangkok, 2022).
3   United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), "Women's Economic Empowerment and the care Economy in the ECE Region: The impact of economic and social policies during the COVID-19 Response and recovery", Policy Brief on Gender 1 (Geneva, 2020).
4   ESCAP, "Valuing and investing in unpaid care and domestic work. Country case study: Cambodia", report (Bangkok, 2022).

(Figure 3.11).[156] Additionally, data from the World Bank's Enterprise Surveys shows that in 29 out of 37 Asia-Pacific countries, the share of firms with women as owners or co-owners is less than 50 per cent, with especially low shares among countries in South and South-West Asia.[157] Women's entrepreneurship is often concentrated in activities associated with their stereotypical roles as mothers and wives, such as the small-scale production of food products, personal services and handicrafts based in or close to the home.[158] Furthermore, the time poverty that results from the large share of unpaid care and domestic work also leaves women with less time to dedicate to growing their businesses, leaving them at a disadvantage.[159] Many countries in the region have not collected data and statistics on women's entrepreneurship and women-owned businesses, making it difficult for governments to deploy effective policies and programmes that address gender inequalities in the business ecosystems and support women entrepreneurs.[160]

156 World Bank We-Fi Database. Available at https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/entrepreneurship/gender (accessed on 14 June 2024).
157 World Bank Enterprise Survey Data. Available at https://www.enterprisesurveys.org/en/custom-query (accessed on 14 June 2024).
158 ESCAP, *Strengthening women's entrepreneurship in national micro, small and medium enterprises policies and action plans: A toolkit for policymakers* (Bangkok, 2022).
159 World Bank, *Enterprising Women: Toward Equal Business Opportunity in Southeast Asia* (Washington, D.C., 2022).
160 World Bank, "Women, Business and the Law 2024", report (Washington, D.C., 2024).

FIGURE 3.11 **Share of female and male business owners, most recent year**
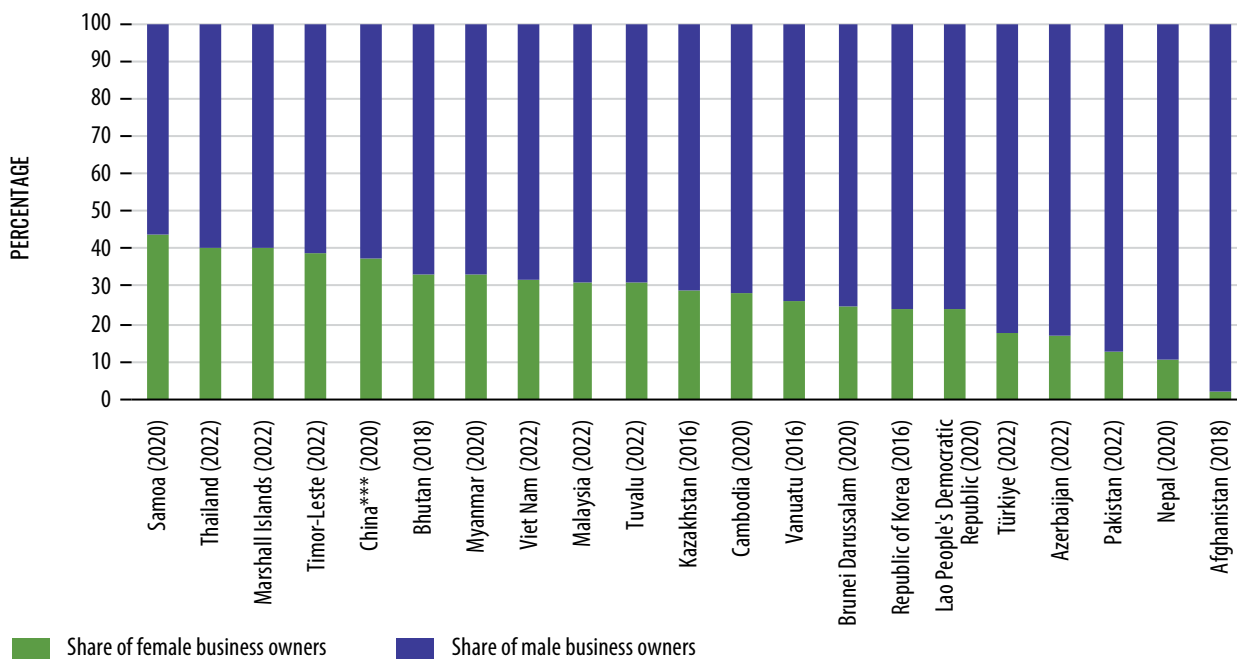
Source: World Bank We-Fi Database. https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/entrepreneurship/gender. ***China only includes data from Beijing and Shanghai in the source (Accessed 14 June 2024).

Legal frameworks and policy environments that shape entrepreneurial ecosystems do not sufficiently address the specific needs and barriers faced by women entrepreneurs in the region. According to the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law data, women in many countries and territories of the region can legally undertake entrepreneurial activities, such as accessing credit, signing a contract, opening a bank account and/or registering a business, in the same way as men.[161] However, in most countries and territories, supportive frameworks to ensure the implementation of relevant legal frameworks remain rather weak. The lack of sex-disaggregated data and statistics continue to mask gender bias and discrimination in policy design and implementation as well as service delivery concerning women entrepreneurs. Government-led programmes supporting women entrepreneurs on access to finance, training, coaching and business development are available in only 25 out of 46 Asia-Pacific countries and territories. Only 27 out of these countries and territories have adopted a national strategy or plan focusing on women's access to financial services.[162] Low levels of knowledge and experience among women entrepreneurs in business management and marketing can reduce

their ability to increase the scale and sustainability of their enterprises. At the same time, male-dominated business networks and lack of access to mentors can also prevent women from gaining key contacts and market information that would benefit their businesses.[163] To unleash the entrepreneurial potential of women, more countries and territories in the region need to consider such strategies or action plans in order to level the playing field for women and allow central banks and governments to implement reforms to ensure financial inclusion for women.[164]

Expert perceptions and real-life experiences of women entrepreneurs underscore the overall poor implementation of legal frameworks and policies in the region. According to the World Bank's perception-based survey of experts, only in 8 out of 37 countries and territories in Asia and the Pacific did participating experts consider that women are in practice able to engage in entrepreneurial activities in the same way as men.[165] Country-level research undertaken by ESCAP echoes these results. For example, in some economies, although there is procedural equality in business registration processes, women entrepreneurs were found more likely to face practical challenges at

161 ESCAP elaboration based on World Bank, "Women, Business and the Law 2.0 Data for 2024: Legal frameworks. Available at: https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl-data (accessed on 27 March 2024).

162 ESCAP elaboration based on World Bank. Women, Business and the Law 2.0 Data for 2024: Supportive frameworks. Available at: https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl-data (accessed on 27 March 2024).

163 ESCAP, *Strengthening women's entrepreneurship in national micro, small and medium enterprises policies and action plans: A toolkit for policymakers* (Bangkok, 2022).

164 World Bank, "Women, Business and the Law 2024", report (Washington, D.C., 2024).

165 ESCAP elaboration based on World Bank, "Women, Business and the Law 2.0 Data for 2024: Expert opinions." Available at: https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl-data (accessed on 27 March 2024).

each stage of the process. These challenges included a lack of knowledge about registration procedures, insufficient documentation such as national identification or passports, lack of Internet access, and high registration fees.[166] In some communities, restrictions on women's mobility also pose barriers for women to access markets and benefit from business networks. As a result, women tend to run informal businesses. Women also have more limited property, land and inheritance rights than men, which can have an impact on their ability to access capital for starting and scaling up their businesses.[167]

Gender-based bias and discrimination is particularly prevalent in women's access to credit. Only 17 out of 46 countries and territories in Asia and the Pacific prohibit gender-based discrimination in access to credit.[168] In practice, the barriers faced by women are in part related to the difficulties they face in formalizing their business, as formalization is often a precondition for accessing financing and state support. Additional barriers for women to borrow are due to complicated lending procedures, a lack of access to collateral as a result of women's lower asset and property ownership, and a lack of credit histories or even bank accounts. Furthermore, women entrepreneurs are generally less successful in attracting venture capital to fund their enterprises due to gender biases among investors.[169] Some countries in the region have taken measures to improve financial inclusion and access to credit for women's start-up businesses (Bhutan, Cambodia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, Nepal, Palau, Tajikistan, Tuvalu, and Timor-Leste).[170]

There is a missed opportunity for the region to promote gender-equal business through public procurement. If public procurement of services, goods, works and supplies includes gender-sensitive criteria in the selection or awarding processes, tie-breaker conditions, quotas or reporting obligations for bidders, it could have a positive impact on gender equality and the empowerment of women. The World Bank estimated that public procurement typically constitutes about 13 to 20 per cent of a country's GDP.[171] However, women-owned businesses win only one per cent of public procurement contracts globally.[172] In Asia and the Pacific, only five countries (**Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines and the Republic of Korea**) have included gender-sensitive provisions in their respective laws related to public procurement.[173]

To address these barriers and level the playing field for women entrepreneurs, there is a need to promote an enabling entrepreneurial environment that is gender-responsive and holistically considers the specific constraints and inequalities facing women. This includes promoting a gender-responsive legal and regulatory environment by actively assessing the gender implications of laws and policies affecting businesses, simplifying business registration procedures, and ensuring equality in property and inheritance rights. It also requires strengthening women's access to credit and capital by addressing discrimination in the financial sector and capital markets and advancing innovative financial solutions such as digital finance for women entrepreneurs. Increasing access to markets, including through digital labour platforms, skills development and information, role models and mentors,[174] and support networks would contribute to the development of a more supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem for women.[175] Lastly, transforming public procurement criteria and processes to be more gender-responsive and inclusive of women-owned businesses would also provide an important opportunity to level the playing field.

166 ESCAP, "Business registration in Bangladesh: Constraints facing women entrepreneurs and recommendations for action", discussion paper (Bangkok, 2022).

167 ESCAP, *Strengthening women's entrepreneurship in national micro, small and medium enterprises policies and action plans: A toolkit for policymakers* (Bangkok, 2022).

168 ESCAP elaboration based on World Bank, "Women, Business and the Law 2.0 Data for 2024: Legal frameworks." Available at: https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl-data (accessed on 27 March 2024).

169 ESCAP, *Strengthening women's entrepreneurship in national micro, small and medium enterprises policies and action plans: A toolkit for policymakers* (Bangkok, 2022).

170 National reports on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action submitted by respective countries. Available at https://www.asiapacificgender.org/node/244 (accessed on 5 August 2024).

171 World Bank, "Global Public Procurement Database: Share, Compare, Improve!", blog. Available at https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/03/23/global-public-procurement-database-share-compare-improve (accessed on 6 August 2024).

172 Lillian F. McManus, "The Anatomy of a Helping Hand: Women-Owned Small Businesses and Federal Contract Procurement," *William and Mary Journal of Women and the Law*, vol. 18, No. 3 (2011): 625-650; Elizabeth A. Vazquez and Andrew J. Sherman, *Buying for Impact: How to Buy from Women and Change the World*, Advantage Media Group (Charleston, 2013).

173 ESCAP elaboration based on World Bank, "Women, Business and the Law 2.0 Data for 2024: Legal frameworks." Available at: https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl-data (accessed on 27 March 2024).

174 This is especially the case for young women and girls. See for instance: UNDP and UNICEF, *Addressing Gender Barriers to Entrepreneurship Among Girls and Young Women In South-East Asia* (Bangkok, 2021).

175 ESCAP, *Strengthening women's entrepreneurship in national micro, small and medium enterprises policies and action plans: A toolkit for policymakers* (Bangkok, 2022).

BOX 3.6 **Strategic measures to support women's entrepreneurship in Samoa**

In 2021, the Government of Samoa launched its first-ever Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) Development Policy and Strategy,[1] recognizing the role that MSMEs and women's entrepreneurship have in the country's economic growth and job creation and providing a gender-responsive framework for MSME-supporting interventions. MSMEs are indeed one of the major drivers of Samoa's economy, estimated to comprise 88 per cent of all enterprises. In 2024, the number of MSMEs participating in the formal sector was recorded to be 25,843, of which approximately 45.9 per cent led by women,[2] who are overrepresented as owners of micro-enterprises. Although barriers to women's entrepreneurship remain, the share of women-owned businesses is growing.[3]

The MSME Development Policy and Strategy aims to address the main challenges faced by women-owned businesses and further increase the share of female entrepreneurs. Towards this aim, the policy includes measures that either specifically target female business owners, directly benefit them, or address common obstacles they face. For example, the policy guarantees an appropriate provision of business advisory services and support to micro-enterprises, taking into consideration the lower number of loan applications from women compared to men. It emphasizes the importance of facilitating access to finance and fostering collaborations with the financial and private sectors to enhance credit accessibility and addressing collateral deficiencies.[4]

In addition to the adoption of the MSME Development Policy and Strategy, the Government of Samoa has taken initial steps to improve the business licensing process for women entrepreneurs. With technical support from ESCAP, a review of this process was conducted from the perspectives of women entrepreneurs, with a view to assisting the large segment of women in the informal sector in transitioning to the formal sector. Based on the findings of the review, recommendations were provided to the Ministry of Customs and Revenue, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Labor and other stakeholders to take concrete actions. The suggested actions include creating more user-friendly government websites for entrepreneurs; streamlining business registration processes and reducing license processing time; adjusting business licensing fees; developing digital business licensing applications; and strengthening and decentralizing women-focused business support services. These recommendations were validated by key government and private sector representatives and discussed at the national policy platform established under the leadership of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Labor.

To accelerate progress towards achieving an equal and inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem, further actions are necessary to eradicate gender biases rooted in customary law. Additionally, there is a scarcity of specific, robust and sex-disaggregated data that can be used to conduct further research, inform evidence-driven policymaking and ultimately create a more favourable environment for the growth of female entrepreneurs.[5] Samoa's strategic measures to support MSMEs are an important step for the promotion of women's entrepreneurship that, accompanied by further action, can serve as a catalyst for women's economic empowerment and the advancement of gender equality.

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1   Samoa, Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Labour, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) Development Policy and Strategy (Apia, 2021).
2   Samoa, Ministry of Women Community and Social Development, *National Report on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (Apia, 2024). Available at https://www.asiapacificgender.org/node/244.
3   ESCAP, "Building hopeful futures: Women-led MSMEs and the pandemic in Samoa", report (Bangkok, 2021).
4   Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Labour/Government of Samoa (2021). Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) Development Policy and Strategy. https://www.mcil.gov.ws/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Samoa-MSME-Development-Policy-and-Strategy.pdf.
5   ESCAP, "A data overview: Taking stock of women entrepreneurs in Samoa", report (Bangkok, 2021).

Women workers in Pakistan. © UN-Women

3.6 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Asia-Pacific region is experiencing rapid digital transformation and population ageing, with considerable projected changes in the labour markets and economic dependency ratios in the decades ahead. The resulting economic and social implications are further intensified by existing decent work deficits, such as inadequate social protection and prevalent low labour incomes, and by age discrimination, gender inequality and equity challenges in the world of work.[176] Women's concentration in informal and vulnerable employment sectors further subject them to precarious, unfavourable working conditions. It is clear that gender inequalities continue to persist in Asia-Pacific labour markets. The underrepresentation of women in workplace governance and decision-making—including in both managerial positions and collective negotiation processes—remains a critical barrier towards gender equality in the world of work. These inequalities are to a large extent rooted in gender social norms that fuel gender occupational segregation and gender pay and income gaps; exclude women and girls from STEM job sectors that are increasingly important for digital and green economies; and place on women a disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work, which in turn limits women's access to employment and their career choices. The care deficit – the mismatch between care demand and care provision for people across the life cycle in Asia and the Pacific — is increasingly a challenge which requires boosted investment in the care economy. While entrepreneurship offers pathways to economic growth and women's economic empowerment, women entrepreneurs continue to face challenges in starting up and growing their businesses, due to limited access to credit and capital, markets, business skills and support networks.

Governments, along with other relevant stakeholders, may wish to consider the following recommendations to address gender inequalities in the labour market and enhance women's access to quality employment and entrepreneurship opportunities:

+ Strengthen legislative frameworks and their implementation, while redressing unfair practices in the public and private sectors, to prohibit discrimination against women, especially women facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, in the world of work.

+ Ratify and implement key ILO Conventions concerning gender equality and women's empowerment, such as C190 - Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190), C189 - Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189), C183 - Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183) and C156 - Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156), to ensure adequate legal protection for all workers, including women workers in the informal sector.

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176 ILO, *Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2024: Promoting decent work and social justice to manage ageing societies* (Geneva, 2024).

+ Improve women's access to labour markets, formal employment and decent work through proactive measures related to gender-responsive skills development, reskilling and up-skilling; support for transition to work, targeting the most vulnerable groups in the labour markets; and empowering women to enter and grow in STEM-related sectors, including those involved the design, use and governance of artificial intelligence (AI) and those in the green and digital economies.

+ Eliminate the gender pay and income gap through targeted measures such as pay transparency policies and gender pay gap audits; addressing occupational segregation by tackling negative gender social norms and labour market discriminations because of women's disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic responsibilities.

+ Ensure the right of all workers to be free from violence and harassment in the world of work, adopting measures to promote violence prevention and response; provide remedies and assistance for victims/survivors of violence; and enhance gender-responsive guidance, training and awareness-raising, in line with ILO R206 – Violence and Harassment Recommendation, 2019 (No. 206).

+ Establish or strengthen gender-responsive and inclusive labour and social protection systems to ensure full access for all workers, including women in informal and vulnerable employment, without discrimination and take progressive measures to achieve higher levels of protection.

+ Enhance the representation and participation of women in collective negotiation processes by expanding proactive measures, such as gender quotas in the leaderships of workers' and employers' organizations and in tripartite bodies.

+ Incorporate strategic investment in the care economy as an integral part of national development strategies to achieve sustainable and gender-inclusive growth and women's empowerment.

+ Design, implement, monitor and evaluate employment-related care policies and social protection that aim to mitigate the "motherhood penalty" and the labour market impacts of the disproportionate unpaid care burden shouldered by women. Measures should include paid parental leave policies, workplace childcare support, flexible working arrangements and telecommuting, return-to-work support, and care-related compensation in work-related social protection schemes. Extend these policies and benefits to cover the large proportion of women that work in the informal economy.

+ Invest in care infrastructure and affordable, accessible and quality care services to reduce unpaid care and domestic work, while also ensuring decent work opportunities for paid care workers, especially domestic workers, migrant workers and community health and care workers.

+ Cultivate an enabling entrepreneurial ecosystem – including easier business registration, access to finance and capital, coaching and networking, gender-responsive procurement – to support women entrepreneurs. Incorporate policy stimulus to encourage women's entrepreneurship in high-potential sectors related to environmental sustainability (such as energy conservation, sustainable consumption, clean energy and water management technologies), as well as STEM-related sectors.

+ Increase efforts to collect sex-disaggregated data and robust case studies that can further shed light on the extent of gender inequalities in the world of work, especially with regard to intersectional vulnerabilities, unpaid work and the informal economy, and use such data and information to drive evidence-based policymaking and programming.

+ Incentivize private sector entities, in close collaboration with women's organizations, to conduct gender assessments across the value chain; foster workplace environments and practices that value workers in all their diversity and provide them with equal opportunities to reach their full potential; and empower women-owned businesses.

+ Mobilize public and private sources to increase investments in care sectors, such as education, health, childcare old-age care and long-term care, that have a higher potential to generate job opportunities and socioeconomic returns than traditional infrastructure investments, as well as to finance gender-responsive digital and green transitions, including by implementing and monitoring gender-responsive budgeting within each government agency and line ministry.

+ Encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing among countries in the region to facilitate the exchange of good practices and lessons learned, particularly those concerning the strengthening of the care economy and the transition towards digital and green economies.

CHAPTER 4

Freedom from gender-based violence

Fijian volunteers have lunch during the launch of the Voices Against Violence curriculum in Suva. © UN Women

KEY MESSAGES

Rooted in gender inequality, violence against women and girls represents one of the fundamental social, economic and political means that perpetuate the subordinate position of women and girls in relation to men and boys. Occurring in private or public spaces and spheres of human interaction, violence affects women and girls to different degrees and in different ways throughout their life cycle.

The impacts of violence extend far beyond immediate physical and emotional trauma for victims/survivors. The burden of violence also imposes an economic toll on the health, social services and justice sectors, and harms society at large by causing a considerable loss of women's productivity.

Despite widespread underestimation, the prevalence of violence against women and girls is alarmingly high in Asia and the Pacific.

+ More than 1 in 4 women aged 15–49 years of age in the region are estimated to have experienced **physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence** at least once in their lifetime.[1]

+ Sub-regional estimates of lifetime non-partner sexual violences range from 2 per cent to 19 per cent among women aged 15–49 years of age.[2]

+ Home is not a safe place for many women and girls in Asia. An estimated 18,400 women and girls were **killed by their intimate partners or other family members** in 2022, the second highest ranking globally after Africa.[3]

+ Despite South Asia leading the global decline in **child marriage**, it is still home to almost half of child brides worldwide. The pace of decline must be seven times faster than the 2012-2022 period to eradicate child marriage in this subregion by 2030.[4] Declines in child marriage rates in East Asia and the Pacific and Eastern Europe and Central Asia have stagnated.[5]

1   World Health Organization (WHO), *Violence against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018: Global, Regional and National Prevalence Estimates for Intimate Partner Violence Against Women and Global and Regional Prevalence Estimates for Non-Partner Sexual Violence Against Women* (Geneva, 2021).
2   Ibid.
3   United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), *Gender-Related Killings of Women and Girls (Femicide/Feminicide): Global Estimates of Female Intimate Partner/Family-Related Homicides in 2022* (Vienna, 2023).
4   United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *A Profile of Child Marriage in South Asia* (New York, 2023).
5   UNICEF, *Is an End to Child Marriage within Reach? Latest Trends and Future Prospects, 2023 Update* (New York, 2023).

➕ Women and girls are overrepresented among detected **trafficking** victims/survivors in East Asia and the Pacific (79 per cent of all victims/survivors), Central Asia (64 per cent) and South Asia (56 per cent), with forced labour and sexual exploitation being the most common forms of violence.[6]

➕ Estimating the prevalence of **technology-facilitated violence against women** remains challenging, but some studies suggest a high prevalence.[7]

Some Asia-Pacific Governments have made strides towards eliminating violence against women and girls through a multi-sectoral and multistakeholder approach on the prevention and response continuum. Noticeable efforts include, among others, strengthening laws, policies and institutional mechanisms; investing in holistic prevention measures; providing multi-sectoral and victim/survivor-centred services; and improving data collection on violence against women and girls to inform policy.

Accelerated actions are needed to invest in quality, coordinated multi-sectoral services for victims/survivors and evidence-informed, longer-term prevention efforts that address the root causes of and risk factors for violence, with active engagement of men and boys.

4.1 OVERVIEW

Gender-based violence (GBV) constitutes a pressing public health crisis, a pervasive violation of human rights and a significant impediment to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. While GBV can impact individuals of any gender, the majority of victims/ survivors[8] are women and girls. The violence is most often perpetrated by men who are current or former intimate partners.[9] This section primarily centres on addressing violence against women and girls, which is defined by the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."[10]

Eliminating violence against women and girls in all its forms primarily corresponds to critical areas of concern D (violence against women) and J (women and the media) outlined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It also lies at the heart of the SDGs, including targets 5.2, 5.3, 16.1 and 16.2. General recommendation No.35 (2017) on gender-based violence against women adopted by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women urges States parties to strengthen the implementation of their obligations in relation to ending violence against women and girls, with accelerated efforts in the areas of prevention, protection, prosecution and punishment, reparations, data collection and monitoring, and international cooperation. In addition, General recommendations no. 31 (revised in 2019) and no.38 (2020) call for accelerated action to address harmful practices and tracking in women and girls in the context of global migration. Furthermore, the agreed conclusions adopted at the 65th (2021) and 67th (2023) sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women specifically encourage efforts to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls in public life, as well as violence that is facilitated or amplified by the use of technologies.

The discussion in Chapter 4 provides an overview of different forms of violence in Asia and the Pacific, focusing on intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, femicide, child marriage, trafficking in persons, migrant smuggling, technology-facilitated violence and other harmful practices against women and girls. The chapter also highlights promising practices and achievements in ending all forms of violence against women and girls in the region.

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6   UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022* (Vienna, 2023).

7   The Economist Intelligence Unit, "Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women", web page, 1 March 2021. Available at https://onlineviolencewomen.eiu.com/ (accessed on 15 February 2024).

8   The term "victim/survivor" refers to women and girls who have experienced or are experiencing gender-based violence to reflect both the terminology used in the legal process and the agency of these women and girls in seeking essential services. Some people suggest that the term "victim" should be avoided as it implies passivity, weakness and inherent vulnerability and fails to recognize the reality of women's resilience and agency, while for others, the term "survivor" is problematic because it denies the sense of victimization experienced by women who have been the target of violent crime. UN-Women recommends the use of the term "victim/ survivor." UN-Women, "Ad Hoc Committee to Elaborate a Comprehensive International Convention on Countering the Use of Information and Communications Technologies for Criminal Purposes, Sixth Session, 21 August–1 September 2023, UN Women submission", brief (New York, 2023).

9   Michaela M. Rogers and Parveen Ali, "Understanding gender-based violence", in *Gender-Based Violence: A Comprehensive Guide*, Parveen Ali and Michaela M. Rogers, eds. (Cham, Springer, 2023).

10   A/RES/48/104.

4.2 CAUSES, IMPACTS AND MEASUREMENT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Occurring in private or public spaces and spheres of human interaction, violence affects women and girls to different degrees and in different ways throughout their life. Population groups in vulnerable situations may experience multiple and intersecting forms of violence based on gender, age, disability, migration status, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, gender identity and other identifiers.[11] For example, adolescent girls may be especially vulnerable to technology-facilitated violence.[12] Older women and women with disabilities may encounter specific risks and additional forms of violence, such as the withholding of medicines and assistive devices and other aspects of care and financial abuse, perpetrated by caregivers or health care professionals. The isolation and dependency of some older women and women with disabilities, coupled with stigma and discrimination against them, makes it challenging for victims/survivors to escape, report the abuse and access services.[13] In low and middle-income countries, women with disabilities are two to four times more likely to experience intimate partner violence than women without disabilities.[14] Lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women encounter higher rates of violence from both strangers and intimate partners compared to the general population.[15]

Rooted in gender inequality, violence against women and girls represents one of the fundamental social, economic and political means that perpetuate the subordinate position of women and girls in relation to men and boys. Gender-related factors, such as entrenched social norms about men's entitlement and privilege over women, unequal gendered power relations and socially prescribed gender roles, often result in the explicit or implicit acceptance and normalization of violence against women and girls.[16]

Violence thus becomes a way to exert power, manipulate individuals, leverage privileges, mask insecurity and dominate decision-making within relationships, families, institutions and society.[17] Moreover, the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic (box 4.1), emerging and protracted crises and conflicts (see Chapter 6), climate change and environmental degradation (see Chapter 7) and other risk factors further intensify various forms and prevalence of violence against women and girls, highlighting the urgency of addressing violence in times of crisis.[18]

The impacts of violence extend far beyond immediate physical and emotional trauma for victims/survivors. Violence against women and girls profoundly affects their long-term health and well-being, constraining victims/survivors' educational and earning potential and impeding their ability to care for themselves and their families, including their children.[19] For example, women with past-year experience of intimate partner violence may be at a higher risk of depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).[20] The prevalence of mental health issues among adolescents, particularly girls, is significantly influenced by the occurrence of sexual violence during mid-adolescence.[21]

The burden of violence also imposes an economic toll on the health, social services and justice sectors, and harms society at large by causing a considerable loss of women's productivity.[22] Findings from a UN-Women costing study on violence against women and girls in Solomon Islands reveal that the annual productivity loss of women in the formal sector due to intimate partner violence is approximately 15.1 million United States dollars ($), accounting for almost 1 per cent of the country's 2021 gross domestic product (GDP).[23] Another UNFPA study shows that the productivity loss of women due to intimate partner violence in Mongolia is estimated to be $166.6–277.6 million, amounting to 1.5–2.4 per cent of 2017 GDP.[24]

11   Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, "General recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No. 19", CEDAW/C/GC/35 (Geneva, 2017).

12   United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *Making All Spaces Safe: Technology-facilitated Gender-based Violence* (New York, 2021).

13   WHO, "WHO calls for greater attention to violence against women with disabilities and older women", news release, 27 March 2024. Available at https://www.who.int/news/item/27-03-2024-who-calls-for-greater-attention-to-violence-against-women-with-disabilities-and-older-women (accessed on 11 April 2024).

14   Kristin Dunkle and others, "Disability and violence against women and girls: Emerging evidence from the What Works to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls Global Programme", brief (London, 2018).

15   Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Report on the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health of persons, communities and populations affected by discrimination and violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals", A/HRC/50/27 (New York, 2022).

16   Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women "General recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No. 19", CEDAW/C/GC/35 (Geneva, 2017).

17   UNiTE Working Group, *A Resource Book on Intimate Partners Violence for UN Staff in Asia* (Bangkok, 2019).

18   United Nations, "Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, Report of the Secretary-General", A/77/302 (New York, 2022).

19   WHO, *Violence against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018: Global, Regional and National Prevalence Estimates for Intimate Partner Violence Against Women and Global and Regional Prevalence Estimates for Non-Partner Sexual Violence Against Women* (Geneva, 2021).

20   Chelsea Spencer and others "Mental health factors and intimate partner violence perpetration and victimization: A meta-analysis," *Psychology of Violence*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 1-19 (2019) and Supa Pengpid and Karl Peltzer "Associations of physical partner violence and sexual violence victimization on health risk behaviours and mental health among university students from 25 countries," *BMC Public Health*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2020).

21   Fiona Mensah and Stephanie Brown, "The impact of sexual violence in gendered adolescent mental health pathways," *The Lancet Psychiatry*, vol. 9, no. 11, pp. 847-848 (October 2022).

22   UNFPA, *A Guide to Better Understanding and Using Violence against Women Prevalence Data: Illustrated with A Case Study on Partner Violence in the Pacific Region* (New York, 2023).

23   UN-Women, "Solomon Islands: Summary report: Costing the impact of intimate partner violence and the resources required to address it", summary report (New York, 2023).

24   UNFPA, "Economic costs of intimate partner violence in Mongolia", report (New York, 2020).

It is critical to recognize that cases of violence remain widely underreported by victims/survivors to the police, health systems or social services due to the fear of blame and severe repercussions. These repercussions can include expulsion from social groups, loss of work and income opportunities, and legal challenges and procedures that are difficult to navigate and retraumatizing. On the other hand, estimates of the prevalence of violence against women and girls, often based on interviews through population-based surveys, are generally considered an underestimate of the true figures. The strictest controls on privacy, confidentiality and safety cannot overcome the barriers associated with reaching the most severe cases. Women who have been killed, hospitalized, fled their homes to escape the violence, or are too afraid to speak to those conducting surveys are excluded from the surveys. Women in vulnerable situations, such as refugees, migrants, women with disabilities, older women, adolescents, and ethnic, sexual orientation and gender identity minorities, may be less likely to be included in prevalence surveys or to feel safe reporting experience of violence in the surveys. Furthermore, due to changes in methodologies, comparisons between prevalence rates over time and between countries, subregions and regions should be interpreted with caution. Where violence is less socially tolerated and justice and other victim/survivor-centred services are stronger, prevalence estimates tend to be higher. Despite advancements over the past decade, further efforts are needed to improve the availability, quality and comparability of data on violence against women and girls.

4.3 DIFFERENT FORMS OF VIOLENCE: STATUS QUO AND TRENDS

Violence against women and girls is an intricate and multifaceted phenomenon, manifesting itself on a continuum of multiple, interrelated and recurring forms that range from intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, femicide, child marriage, trafficking in persons, migrant smuggling, technology-facilitated violence to harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation and virginity testing.

4.3.1 Intimate partner violence

Intimate partner violence is one of the most common forms of violence against women and girls. It encompasses behaviours by a current or former intimate partner, within the context of marriage, cohabitation and any other formal or informal union, that inflict physical, sexual or psychological harm. Such violence often includes physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours.[25] The latest WHO 2018 estimates indicate that, globally, 10 per cent of ever-married/partnered women and girls aged 15 years and older have been subjected to physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence in the previous 12 months.[26] Women and girls of reproductive age (15–49 years) are more likely to have recent experiences such violence, with an estimated rate of 13 per cent. In addition, 26 per cent of women and girls aged 15 years and above and 27 per cent of women of reproductive age have encountered physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence at least once in their lifetime.[27] Older women are frequently not included in intimate partner violence data, and they experience unique risks with a reported a shift from physical/sexual violence towards psychological violence, such as abandonment threats and other controlling behaviour, as partners age.[28]

In Asia and the Pacific, the prevalence of reported physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence taking place in the past 12 months mirrors that at the global level, standing at 10.3 per cent for women aged 15 years and older and 12.8 per cent for women aged 15–49 years. However, significant disparities are observed among countries and territories, as well as subregions. The reported prevalence among the countries and territories in Asia and the Pacific with available data ranges from 1.7 per cent to 33.6 per cent for women and girls aged 15 years and above, and from 2.4 per cent to 34.7 per cent for women of reproductive age (figure 4.1).[29] Data disaggregated by SDG subregional grouping are available for the 15–49 years age group. Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) exhibits the highest past-12-month prevalence: 30 per cent in Melanesia, 22 per cent in Micronesia and 19 per cent in Polynesia.[30] Southern Asia also has a high estimated rate (19 per cent),

25 WHO, "Violence against women", web page, 9 March 2021. Available at https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women.

26 As psychological intimate partner violence is often conceptualized differently across cultures and contexts, further methodological work is required to ensure accurate measurement and comparability of its prevalence.

27 WHO, *Violence against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018: Global, Regional and National Prevalence Estimates for Intimate Partner Violence Against Women and Global and Regional Prevalence Estimates for Non-Partner Sexual Violence Against Women* (Geneva, 2021).

28 WHO, "WHO calls for greater attention to violence against women with disabilities and older women", news, 27 March 2024. Available at: https://www.who.int/news/item/27-03-2024-who-calls-for-greater-attention-to-violence-against-women-with-disabilities-and-older-women (accessed on 2 August 2024) and UN-Women and WHO, "Violence against women 60 years and older: Data availability, methodological issues and recommendations for good practice", briefing note (New York, 2024).

29 ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicators by SDG: 5.2.1 – Violence against women (by intimate partner)", database. Available at https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 8 February 2024). The ESCAP data are sourced from the WHO 2018 estimates. It is important to note that given the sensitive nature of these surveys, varying methodology and more recent data being available in some countries, national-level surveys may have found higher or lower levels of reported intimate partner violence than what is reported in the WHO 2018 estimates.

30 Melanesia: Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu; Micronesia: Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia (Federated States of), Nauru and Palau; and Polynesia: Cook Islands, Samoa, Tonga and Tuvalu.

FIGURE 4.1 **Percentage of ever-partnered women and girls subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months, by age group, 2018**

Country	15 years and older	15–49 years
Afghanistan	33.6	34.7
Papua New Guinea	25.5	30.6
Timor-Leste	24.6	28.2
Vanuatu	24.2	29.4
Solomon Islands	23.6	28.1
Bangladesh	20.8	23.2
Kiribati	19.5	25.2
Micronesia (Federated States of)	18.8	21.1
Fiji	16.4	23.2
India	15.9	18.4
Nauru	15.5	20.0
Tuvalu	15.4	19.8
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	15.2	17.6
Marshall Islands	15.0	19.3
Pakistan	14.6	16.2
Samoa	13.5	17.8
Tonga	12.1	16.9
Tajikistan	12.0	14.0
Kyrgyzstan	11.6	13.3
Palau	10.9	13.8
Cook Islands	10.7	13.7
Nepal	10.3	11.4
Türkiye	9.5	12.1
Mongolia	9.3	11.5
Republic of Korea	8.0	8.8
Myanmar	8.7	10.7
Bhutan	8.4	8.6
Cambodia	8.2	9.1
Indonesia	7.5	8.9
Viet Nam	7.3	9.5
Thailand	7.1	9.3
Lao People's Democratic Republic	6.7	8.0
China	5.9	7.6
Maldives	5.3	6.1
Kazakhstan	4.9	6.0
Philippines	4.9	5.9
Armenia	4.5	4.6
Azerbaijan	4.0	5.2
Sri Lanka	3.3	4.1
New Zealand	3.2	4.2
Japan	3.0	3.9
Georgia	2.2	2.9
Australia	2.0	2.9
Singapore	2.0	2.4
Hong Kong, China	1.7	2.5

PERCENTAGE

● 15 years and older   ○ 15–49 years

Source: ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicators by SDG: 5.2.1 – Violence against women (by intimate partner)", database. Available at https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 8 February 2024). The ESCAP data are sourced from the WHO 2018 estimates.

followed by Western Asia (13 per cent), Central Asia (9 per cent), South-Eastern Asia (9 per cent), Eastern Asia (7 per cent), and Australia and New Zealand (3 per cent).[31]

Regarding the lifetime prevalence in the Asia-Pacific region, available data disaggregated by SDG regional groupings suggest that the rate for women aged 15–49 years stands at 27 per cent in Asia and 30 per cent in Oceania, ranging between 11 per cent and 53 per cent in Asia-Pacific countries and territories. Substantial variations exist among subregions, with Melanesia recording the highest prevalence at 51 per cent, followed by Micronesia (41 per cent), Polynesia (39 per cent), Southern Asia (35 per cent), Western Asia (29 per cent), Australia and New Zealand (23 per cent), South-Eastern Asia (21 per cent), Eastern Asia (20 per cent) and Central Asia (18 per cent).[32]

A recent ESCAP study found that in the 18 countries included in the analysis, women under 34 years of age with lower or secondary education living in poorer households on average experience much higher prevalence of intimate partner violence than others. Furthermore, having children under 5 years of age was associated with higher prevalence in half of the countries analysed.[33]

4.3.2 Non-partner sexual violence

Non-partner sexual violence refers to being forced, coerced or threatened to perform any harmful or unwanted sexual act by non-partners, such as other family members, friends, acquaintances and strangers. It can manifest as rape, attempted rape, unwanted sexual touching or non-contact forms of sexual violence.[34] According to the WHO 2018 estimates, approximately 6 per cent of women and girls from both age groups (15 years and older and 15–49 years) have experienced non-partner sexual violence at least once in their lifetime at the global level. **In the region, data disaggregated by SDG grouping for women of reproductive age indicate a lifetime prevalence of 4 per cent in Asia and 16 per cent in Oceania.** Subregional estimates vary from 2 per cent in Central Asia and Southern Asia, 4 per cent in South-Eastern Asia and Western Asia, 7 per cent in Eastern Asia, 10 per cent in Melanesia, 12 per cent in Micronesia and Polynesia to 19 per cent in Australia and New Zealand.[35]

The WHO estimates reflect the result of interrelated factors, such as the perceived social stigma surrounding sexual violence, the quality of survey measures and the robustness of interviewer training. The varying subregional rates must be interpreted with caution, considering the diverse social and cultural contexts in Asia and the Pacific. It is also important to note that sexual harassment is not included in the WHO estimates of sexual violence prevalence, resulting in an underestimation of the true extent of sexual violence experienced by women and girls.

4.3.3 Femicide

Femicide, also known as gender-related killings of women and girls, denotes intentional killings driven by gender-related factors. Such violence mostly relates to homicides committed by intimate partners or other family members, following prior experiences of physical, sexual and emotional abuse. In 2022, a staggering 88,900 women and girls were killed intentionally worldwide, with 48,800 falling victim to intimate partners or other family members. This translates to approximately 1.2 out of every 100,000 women and girls globally being killed by someone within their own family. **Asia recorded an estimated 18,400 killings of women and girls by their intimate partners or other family members, ranking second globally after Africa, while Oceania witnessed approximately 200 of such killings given its relatively small total population.** The female intimate partner/family-related homicide rate was 0.8 per 100,000 female population in Asia and 1.1 in Oceania; both figures are lower than the global estimate of 1.2.[36]

While 80 per cent of homicides worldwide targeted men and boys in 2022, women and girls were disproportionately affected by homicidal violence at home. Globally, they represented about 53 per cent of all victims/survivors of domestic killings and 66 per cent of all victims/survivors of intimate partner killings. Female intimate partner/family-related homicides accounted for 55 per cent of all female homicides, compared to only 12 per cent among men. In Asia, the figure was 56 per cent for women and 18 per cent for men, while in Oceania, it stood at 60 per cent for women and 24 for men.[37] The data on the size and proportion of femicides by intimate partners or other family members clearly indicate that home is not a safe place for many women and girls.

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31 WHO, *Violence against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018: Global, Regional and National Prevalence Estimates for Intimate Partner Violence Against Women and Global and Regional Prevalence Estimates for Non-Partner Sexual Violence Against Women* (Geneva, 2021).

32 Ibid.

33 ESCAP, *Inequality of Opportunity in Asia and the Pacific: Intimate Partner Violence Against Women: Exploring Shared Circumstances Behind Higher Prevalence in Asia and the Pacific* (Bangkok, 2023).

34 WHO, *Violence against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018: Global, Regional and National Prevalence Estimates for Intimate Partner Violence Against Women and Global and Regional Prevalence Estimates for Non-Partner Sexual Violence Against Women* (Geneva, 2021).

35 Ibid.

36 Country groupings follow the United Nations M49 standard. For details, please visit https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49/. UNODC and UN-Women, *Gender-Related Killings of Women and Girls (Femicide/Feminicide): Global Estimates of Female Intimate Partner/Family-Related Homicides in 2022* (Vienna, 2023).

37 Ibid.

Female infanticide, which is linked to sex-selective abortions, is another form of femicide.[38] Sex selection has severe consequences for women's health and societal well-being, reinforcing gender biases and fostering gender-based violence. The preference for male children may lead to repeated abortions that harm women's mental and physical health, creates gender imbalances and exacerbates issues like trafficking in persons. Sex selection practices have led to a sex ratio at birth reaching as high as 114.6 (114.6 male birth per 100 female births) in countries in Asia and the Pacific, well above the standard biological level of 105. High sex ratios at birth are found in North and Central Asia, East and North-East Asia, South-East Asia, and South and South-West Asia.[39]

As with other forms of violence against women and girls, measuring the prevalence of femicide is difficult because of varying definitions and lack of sex-disaggregated data. In addition, many forms may not be recognised, such as honour-related killings, women who commit suicide due to violence and women who die prematurely due to the impacts of living with violence. The Statistical Framework for Measuring the Gender-Related Killing of Women and Girls, developed by UN-Women and UNODC and adopted by the United Nations Statistical Commission in 2022, establishes a statistical definition and provides of list of variables to identify and quantify different forms of femicide.[40]

4.3.4 Child marriage

Child marriage, any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child, is a human rights violation and linked to a multitude of negative outcomes.[41]Girls are more likely to be married than boys and are at risk of early marriage due to factors like poverty, beliefs that marriage ensures protection and family honour, social norms, inadequate legislation, and religious and customary laws, resulting in their loss of childhood and denial of education, health, and security rights.[42] Child marriage is linked to increased

prevalence of early pregnancy and its associated sexual and reproductive health complications, limited decision-making capacities and physical mobility, elevated vulnerability to intimate partner violence, heightened risk of depression, diminished educational attainment and restricted economic opportunities. Child marriage also has economic costs. Based on economic modelling and statistical calculations, a costing study in Pakistan estimates that between 2019-2020, the Pakistani economy lost $ 0.8 billion or 0.42 per cent of the total GDP because of the overall incidence of child marriage in the country.[43]

The latest UNICEF estimates suggest that 640 million girls and women were married in childhood worldwide, 290 million of them living in South Asia (45 per cent). East Asia and the Pacific is home to 95 million child brides (15 per cent), while 20 million reside in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (3 per cent).[44] **The practice of child marriage saw a decline globally from 23 per cent in 2012 to 19 per cent in 2022, primarily driven by South Asia.** In this subregion, the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18 dropped by nearly half, from 46 per cent in 2012 to 26 per cent in 2022. A significant 78 per cent of all child marriages averted worldwide from 1997 to 2022 occurred in South Asia. India led the subregion's overall progress in reducing child marriage. Countries such as Bangladesh, Maldives and Pakistan witnessed notable declines, with Maldives nearly eliminating the practice. Despite these achievements, many countries in South Asia still have alarmingly high rates of child marriage (figure 4.2). Moreover, compared to the progress made between 2012 and 2022, the pace of decline must be seven times faster to eradicate child marriage in South Asia by 2030.[45] In East Asia and the Pacific and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the prevalence is low but stagnant, hovering around 10 per cent in the past decade. Accelerated efforts are required to meet the target of ending all child marriage by 2030.[46]

38   UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2019* (Vienna, 2019).

39   UNFPA, *Preventing Son Preference and Undervaluing of Girls in Asia Pacific* (New York, 2020).

40   UN-Women and UNODC-KOSTAT Centre of Excellence for Statistics on Crime and Criminal Justice in Asia and Pacific, "International Conference on Ending Gender-Based Killings of Women and Girls, 25–27 September 2023, Seoul, Korea", meeting report (Seoul, 2024).

41   UNICEF, "Child marriage: Child marriage threatens the lives, well-being and futures of girls around the world", web page. Available at https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage (accessed on 12 February 2024). Note that "love marriage" or unions that are peer led, by consent, are also considered child marriages but imply the girl's agency and choice. This form of child marriage has not been given due attention in research. For more information see UNFPA, "Diversity of types of child marriage and early union in Asia Pacific", briefing note (Bangkok, 2021).

42   UN-Women, *Legislating and Enforcing the Minimum Age of Marriage: A Comparative Study of Experiences and Lessons Learned in Ending the Legalization of Child Marriage* (New York, 2023).

43   Pakistan, National Commission on the Status of Women and UN-Women Pakistan, *Costing Study on Child Marriage in Pakistan: A Country Level Report 2020-2021 Child Brides – the Cost We Bear* (Islamabad, 2021).

44   Please note that country grouping differs between ESCAP and UNICEF. See Annex 2. UNICEF, *Is an End to Child Marriage within Reach? Latest Trends and Future Prospects, 2023 Update* (New York, 2023).

45   UNICEF, *A Profile of Child Marriage in South Asia* (New York, 2023).

46   UNICEF, *Is an End to Child Marriage within Reach? Latest Trends and Future Prospects, 2023 Update* (New York, 2023).

FIGURE 4.2   **Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 15 and 18, latest year available**

Country (Year)	Before age 15	Before age 18
Bangladesh (2019)	15.5	51.4
Nepal (2019)	7.9	32.8
Lao People's Democratic Republic (2017)	7.1	32.7
Afghanistan (2017)	4.2	28.3
Papua New Guinea (2018)	8.0	27.3
India (2016)	6.8	27.3
Solomon Islands (2015)	5.6	21.3
Thailand (2019)	3.0	20.2
Kiribati (2019)	2.4	18.4
Pakistan (2018)	3.6	18.3
Philippines (2017)	2.2	16.5
Indonesia (2017)	2.0	16.3
Myanmar (2016)	1.9	16.0
Timor-Leste (2016)	2.6	14.9
Türkiye (2018)	2.0	14.7
Georgia (2018)	0.3	13.9
Kyrgyzstan (2018)	0.3	12.9
Mongolia (2018)	0.9	12.0
Tonga (2019)	0.4	10.1
Sri Lanka (2016)	0.9	9.8
Tajikistan (2017)	0.1	8.7
Samoa (2020)	0.9	7.4
Kazakhstan (2015)	0.2	7.0
Russian Federation (2017)	0.3	6.2
Turkmenistan (2019)	0.2	6.1
Armenia (2016)	0.0	5.3
Fiji (2021)	0.2	4.0
Maldives (2017)	0.0	2.2
Tuvalu (2020)	0.0	1.8
Democratic People's Republic of Korea (2017)	0.0	0.1
Singapore (2021)	0.0	0.1

PERCENTAGE

● Before age 15   ○ Before age 18

Source: ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicators by SDG: 5.3.1 – Women married before age 15 and 18", database. Available at https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 12 February 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic also interrupted progress in eliminating child marriages. COVID-19 school closures disrupted education, increasing risks for girls such as dropping out, exposure to violence, and early pregnancy, while economic insecurity has pushed some families to cut education spending or consider child marriage as a survival strategy. Additionally, pandemic-related travel restrictions and social distancing have limited access to health care, protection services, and legal recourse, exacerbating vulnerabilities and potentially increasing child marriage rates.[47] Although the full impact of the pandemic has yet to be measured, it is estimated that up to 10 million girls globally were at risk of child marriage as a result of the pandemic.[48]

4.3.5   Trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling

Trafficking in persons is "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit". It occurs in every region of the world, harming women and men of all ages and from all backgrounds.[49] In 2020, the number of victims/survivors of trafficking detected globally was 1.00 per 100,000 population, a 11 per cent decrease compared to 1.13 per 100,000 population in 2019. This change can be partially explained by factors that particularly affect low- and middle-income countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as

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47   Ibid.

48   UNICEF, *COVID-19: A Threat to Progress against Child Marriage* (New York, 2021).

49   UNODC, "Human trafficking", web page. Available at https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-Trafficking/Human-Trafficking.html (accessed on 13 February 2024).

reduced institutional capacities to detect victims/survivors, diminished opportunities for traffickers due to lockdown measures, and some trafficking forms taking place in more hidden settings.[50]

Trafficking in persons has a disproportionate impact on women and girls. Economic insecurity, poverty, limited viable employment options, gender-based violence, as well as migration policies and pathways, are among the critical factors contributing to the vulnerability of women and girls to trafficking. Crises such as climate change, conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbate trafficking risks, especially considering the breakdown of socioeconomic structures, essential services and justice systems.[51] Women and girls accounted for 42 per cent and 18 per cent, respectively, of the total detected victims/survivors worldwide in 2020, compared to 23 per cent for men and 17 per cent for boys. Trafficking for sexual exploitation was one of the most common forms of exploitation (0.37 per 100,000 population; 38.7 per cent of all trafficking cases) and women and girls represented 91 per cent of the victims/survivors of trafficking for sexual exploitation.[52] In addition, the UNODC analysis of court cases revealed that female victims/survivors were three times more likely than males to experience physical or extreme violence from traffickers. Furthermore, children (girls and boys) are 1.7 times more likely to suffer physical or extreme violence than adults (women and men), and girls are 1.5 times more likely to suffer violence than women.[53]

Women and girls were overrepresented among detected trafficking victims/survivors in East Asia and the Pacific (79 per cent of all victims/survivors), Central Asia (64 per cent) and South Asia (56 per cent), while men and boys comprised 66 per cent of the victims/survivors in Eastern Europe.[54] Regarding subregional trends, a sharp 59 per cent decrease in the number of detected trafficking victims/survivors was observed in East Asia and the Pacific, from 0.83 per 100,000 population in 2019 to 0.34 in 2020. The number was relatively stable in South Asia since 2017, around 0.45 victims/survivors within each 100,000 people in the broader population. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the COVID-19 pandemic had a limited impact on the overall increasing number of trafficking victims/survivors since 2017, which reached 0.79 per 100,000 population in 2020 (figure 4.3).[55]

East Asia and the Pacific and Eastern Europe and Central Asia exhibited a steady decline in the number of victims/survivors of sexual exploitation, dropping to 0.08 and 0.20 per 100,000 population, respectively, in 2020. South Asia saw a return to the level in 2017, around 0.10 per 100,000 population, after peaking at 0.16 in 2019. In 2020, trafficking for sexual exploitation was notably prevalent in Central Asia, representing 76 per cent of all trafficking cases in 2020, compared to 38 per cent in East Asia and the Pacific, 37 per cent in South Asia and 9 per cent in Eastern Europe. Conversely, forced labour was the most detected form of exploitation in Eastern Europe (87 per cent of all trafficking cases), South Asia

FIGURE 4.3 **Numbers of total trafficking victims/survivors and of victims/survivors of trafficking for sexual exploitation detected per 100,000 population, 2017–2020**
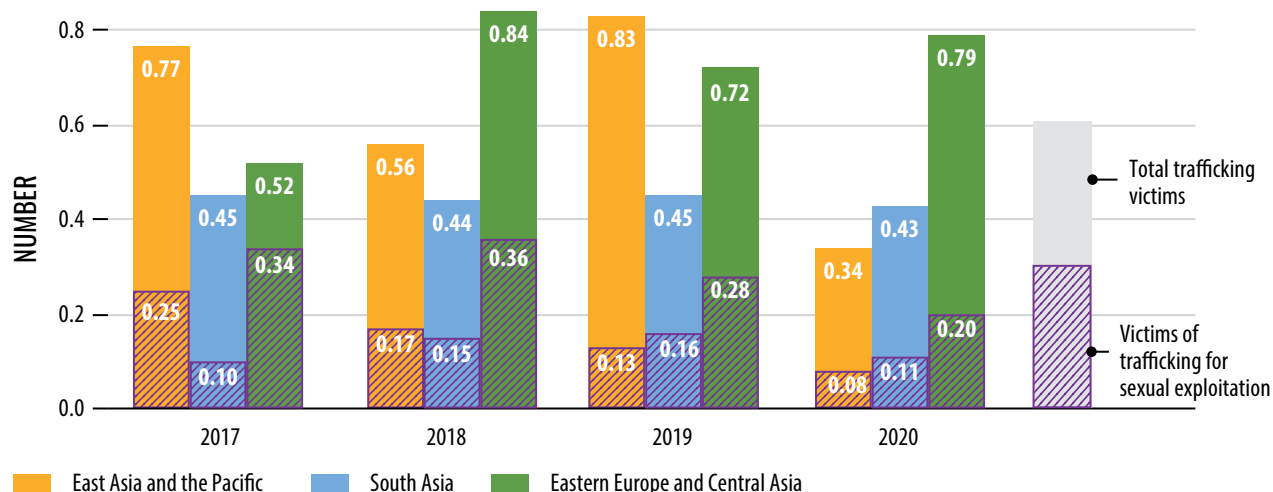
Source: UNODC, Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022 (Vienna, 2023).

50 UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022* (Vienna, 2023).
51 United Nations, "Trafficking in women and girls: crises as a risk multiplier, Report of the Secretary-General", A/77/292 (New York, 2022).
52 UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022* (Vienna, 2023).
53 United Nations, "Trafficking in women and girls: crises as a risk multiplier, Report of the Secretary-General", A/77/292 (New York, 2022).
54 UNODC Eastern Europe country grouping consists of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and the Russian Federation are ESCAP member States. See Annex 2 for details.
55 Please note that country grouping differs between ESCAP and UNODC. See Annex 2. UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022* (Vienna, 2023).

(56 per cent) and East Asia and the Pacific (54 per cent), but only 15 per cent in Central Asia.[56] The complex landscape of trafficking in persons in Asia and the Pacific highlights the significance of understanding the gendered social, economic, political and cultural factors that underlie the vulnerability of women and men of all ages to such GBV in diverse contexts.

Migrant smuggling is also a concern for women and girls in the Asia-Pacific region. While sometimes linked, trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling are separate crimes. In contrast to trafficking in persons which can take place both domestically and internationally, migrant smuggling refers to "the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident".[57] Smuggling need not include any form of force, coercion, deception or abuse of power. However, like trafficked persons, smuggled migrants are often victims/survivors of other crimes, ill treatment, violence and human rights violations.[58]

Migrant smuggling is prevalent in the region,[59] driven by key trends such as the confluence of aspirations for migration in countries of origin, demand for low-wage labour in countries of destination, and limited or expensive legal channels for safe and regular labour immigration; the existence of substantial populations in situations of forced displacement and statelessness who are seeking international protection; and the prevalence of corruption among some public officials in countries of origin, transit and destination.[60] Smuggled migrants, especially women and girls, are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation during their journeys. A 2024 UNODC study on migrant smuggling in Southeast Asia indicated that, among the surveyed smuggled women, 24 per cent experienced physical violence, 13 per cent experienced non-physical violence such as harassment, and 11 per cent experienced sexual violence. Almost one in three surveyed women reported being afraid of sexual violence in general in the most dangerous location they had travelled through.[61]

4.3.6 Technology-facilitated violence

Technology-facilitated violence is defined by UN-Women as "any act that is committed, assisted, aggravated or amplified by the use of ICTs or other digital tools, that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological, social, political or economic harm, or other infringements of rights and freedoms."[62] It manifests itself in various forms, including but not limited to, online harassment, cyberstalking, technology-facilitated sexual abuse, doxing, hacking, hate speech, defamation and limiting the use of technology. Many types of offline violence are replicated or intensified in digital spaces and technology-facilitated violence can precede, follow or occur concurrently with offline violence.[63]

Technology-facilitated violence against women and girls largely shares the root causes and drivers of offline violence, reflecting systematic structural gender inequality, entrenched social and cultural norms and patterns of harmful masculinities. The distinct features of digital spaces, such as the vast scale, rapid speed and ease of online communication, coupled with anonymity, pseudonymity and impunity, further create a conducive environment that breeds violence against women and girls. Measures to prevent and respond to technology-facilitated violence against women and girls largely depend on the self-regulation and voluntary actions of digital service providers and platforms, with limited implementation, sanctions, accountability and independent oversight.[64]

In addition, technology-facilitated violence is constantly evolving, with new forms and patterns emerging alongside technological advancement and digital transformation. Such violence imposes severe impacts on the physical and mental health, well-being and safety of women and girls. It discourages their public participation and leadership, and exacerbates economic and political gender inequalities.[65] While women and girls in all their diversity are at risk of technology-facilitated violence, those holding a prominent digital presence, such as politicians, journalists, human rights defenders and women's rights activists, as well as women with disabilities,

56 UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022* (Vienna, 2023).

57 UNODC, "Human trafficking and migrant smuggling", web page. Available at https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/secondary/human-trafficking-and-migrant-smuggling.html (accessed on 10 July 2024) and UNODC, "Migrant smuggling FAQs" web page. Available at https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/migrant-smuggling/faqs.html (accessed on 10 July 2024).

58 The Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons, "What is the difference between trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants?", issue brief (Vienna, 2016).

59 ESCAP, *Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2020: Assessing Implementation of the Global Compact for Migration* (United Nations publication, 2020).

60 UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants, *Migrant Smuggling in Southeast Asia* (Vienna, 2024).

61 Ibid.

62 UN-Women and WHO, "Technology-facilitated violence against women: Taking stock of evidence and data collection", research paper (New York, 2023).

63 For a detailed introduction to various forms of technology-facilitated violence, please see UNFPA, *Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: Making All Spaces Safe* (New York, 2021).

64 United Nations, "Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, Report of the Secretary-General", A/77/302 (New York, 2022).

65 UN-Women, "Accelerating efforts to tackle online and technology facilitated violence against women and girls (VAWG)", policy brief (New York, 2022).

adolescent girls, women of colour and persons of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities are particularly susceptible.[66]

The lack of consensus on measurement methodologies for technology-facilitated violence presents a significant challenge in comprehending the extent of the issue and subregional differences in Asia and the Pacific. A study on the global evidence on online gender-based violence suggests that the prevalence ranges from 16 per cent to 58 per cent.[67] A study conducted in 2020 indicates that 38 per cent of women worldwide had personal experiences with online violence, 65 per cent reported knowing other women who had been targeted online, and 85 per cent witnessed online violence against other women. In Asia and the Pacific, the prevalence of online violence against women was estimated at 88 per cent.[68]

Between 1 per cent and 20 per cent of children aged 12–17 experienced at least one form of clear online sexual exploitation and abuse within the year prior to being surveyed in Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam. In all six countries, a higher proportion of girls experienced online sexual exploitation in the past year, although the difference was less than 5 percentage points in all countries.[69] In the same six countries, it was also found that 7 out of 10 of adolescents were distressed by online experiences, including exposure to obscene and violent content, and horror (ghosts for example). Girls and youth with differing sexual orientation and gender identities face specific gender-based risks such as body-shaming and unwanted sexual advances, while boys are more likely to encounter cyberbullying, exposure to sexualized images of women or violent images, and scams.[70]

In 2021, another study in 26 countries across the globe showed that 91 per cent of surveyed girls and young women were concerned about online misinformation and disinformation, with 46 per cent feeling sad, depressed, stressed worried or anxious. Misinformation and disinformation hinder girls' activism, leading to approximately 25 per cent of survey respondents feeling less confident in expressing their views and 20 per cent discontinuing their participation in politics or current affairs.[71] Despite these pioneering efforts at data collection regarding technology-facilitated gender-based violence, there is an urgent need to further understand the forms, impacts and dynamics of technology-facilitated violence at the national level and generate comparable data on its prevalence.[72]

4.3.7 Other harmful practices

Female genital mutilation

Over 230 million women and girls worldwide have experienced female genital mutilation (FGM).[73] Although the overall prevalence of FGM has declined over the past three decades, approximately 80 million women and girls in the Asia-Pacific region are still affected, predominantly in some countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia.[74] In Australia, modelling based on census data estimates that 53,000 migrant girls and women have experienced FGM, mostly performed before migration.[75] Research on FGM in the region is limited and often focused on specific populations, with data collection hindered in countries where authorities have denied the existence of FGM.

Virginity testing

Virginity testing is a long-standing tradition that has been documented in at least 20 countries spanning all regions of the world. This practice, carried out by doctors, police officers or community leaders, is prevalent in some countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia, often under cultural or social pressures related to marriage eligibility or honour. Virginity testing has been condemned by United Nations agencies as unscientific, unethical, and a violation of human rights, leading to physical and psychological harm for women and girls subjected to it.[76]

66 UN-Women, "Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls: Expert guidance and substantive inputs to preparations for the 67th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women", report (New York, 2023) and UNFPA, *Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: Making All Spaces Safe* (New York, 2021).

67 Institute of Development Studies, "Global evidence on the prevalence and impact of online gender-based violence (OGBV)", K4D Helpdesk Report (Brighton, 2021).

68 The Economist Intelligence Unit, "Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women", 1 March 2021. Available at https://onlineviolencewomen.eiu.com/ (accessed on 15 February 2024).

69 UNICEF Global Office of Research and Foresight – Innocenti, "Children's experiences of online sexual exploitation and abuse in 12 Countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia", Disrupting Harm Data Insight 1 (Florence, 2022).

70 UNICEF *Girls' Digital Literacy in the East Asia and Pacific Region: Spotlight on Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam* (Bangkok, 2023).

71 Plan International, *The Truth Gap: How Misinformation and Disinformation Online Affect the Lives, Learning and Leadership of Girls and Young Women* (Surrey, 2021).

72 University of Melbourne and UNFPA, "Measuring technology-facilitated gender-based violence: A discussion paper", discussion paper (Melbourne, 2023).

73 UNICEF, "What is female genital mutilation? Everything you need to know about FGM and what UNICEF is doing to stop it", web page. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/protection/female-genital-mutilation (accessed on 2 August 2024).

74 UNICEF, "Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Statistics - UNICEF Data", database. Available at: https://data.unicef.org/resources/female-genital-mutilation-statistics (accessed on 2 August 2024).

75 Angela Dawson and others, "Addressing female genital mutilation in the Asia Pacific: The neglected sustainable development target", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, vol. 44, no. 1 (February 2020).

76 WHO, UNHCR and UN-Women, *Eliminating Virginity Testing-An Interagency Statement* (Geneva, 2018).

BOX 4.1   Violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic

Violence against women and girls intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a UN-Women-led study conducted in 2021, globally, 45 per cent of surveyed women reported that they or a woman they know had experienced a form of violence against women since the pandemic's onset. One in four women reported that household conflicts had become more frequent, and three in ten women considered that violence against women had increased in their community.[1] This phenomenon known as the "shadow pandemic" was evident in the Asia-Pacific region. Despite limited survey data, the trend was clear. There was a higher volume of calls to domestic violence helplines and a significant increase in the number of domestic violence cases handled by shelters and women's organizations across the region. The incidence of technology-facilitated violence also appeared to have risen due to increased Internet usage amid the pandemic. Elevated exposure to perpetrators resulting from lockdown measures, triggering stressful environments for perpetrators and reduced support services contributed to a surge in violence against women and girls in the context of the pandemic.[2]

To address violence against women and girls during the pandemic, national responses and comprehensive measures proved necessary. For instance, **Uzbekistan** developed and implemented standard operating procedures to ensure coordinated responses by law enforcement, healthcare, and socio-psychological services. A presidential Resolution (2021) was released, outlining measures to enhance support services for violence victims/survivors. The measures included transforming the Republican Centre for the Rehabilitation and Adaptation of Victims of Violence and Prevention of Suicides, previously in an associative status, into a governmental legal entity under the Ministry for Support of Mahalla and Family, as well as creating new centres for rehabilitation and adaptation. Additionally, the government provided financial and technical support to centres and organizations to combat violence against women and girls, through the Fund for the Support of Women and the Family (981.6 million UZS) and the Public Fund under the Oliy Majlis (461 million UZS).[3]

Similarly, in **Solomon Islands**, the Gender-Based Violence in Emergency Committee implemented GBV-related activities during the pandemic. GBV health responses were considered essential and continued to operate during lockdowns. An emergency phone tree and an emergency referral pathway were developed by the Committee to ensure violence victims/survivors could access needed services. Furthermore, the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force's family violence unit remained on high alert, with police vehicles specifically allocated for services for violence victims/survivors. Community protection committee members also conducted various awareness programmes on violence against women and girls in emergencies.[4]

1   UN-Women, *Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women during COVID-19* (New York, 2021).
2   ESCAP, "The Covid-19 pandemic and violence against women in Asia and the Pacific", policy paper (Bangkok, 2020).
3   United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker", database. Available at: https://data.undp.org/insights/covid-19-global-gender-response-tracker (accessed on 2 August 2024).
4   Ibid.

4.4   PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Eliminating violence against women and girls requires a comprehensive multi-sectoral approach with whole-of-society engagement along the prevention and response continuum. Efforts by Asia-Pacific Governments to address violence against women and girls include strengthening laws, policies and institutional mechanisms; investing in holistic prevention measures; providing multi-sectoral and victim/survivor-centred services for women and girls subjected to violence; and improving data collection and use on violence against women and girls.

4.4.1   Strengthening laws, policies and institutional mechanisms

Establishing robust legal frameworks and effective institutional mechanisms constitutes a crucial step to eradicate impunity and societal tolerance for violence against women and girls. Indeed, weak legal frameworks perpetuate violence against women by failing to effectively prevent, investigate and prosecute perpetrators. This lack of legal protection allows for impunity, emboldening perpetrators and discouraging survivors from seeking justice, leading to a cycle of violence and inequality. Laws and policies signal that GBV is a serious crime and contribute to a shift in social norms to promote adequate protection of victims/survivors' rights.[77]

77   OECD, *Joining Forces for Gender Equality: What Is Holding Us Back?* (Paris, 2023).

Many countries in the Asia-Pacific region have yet to enact laws that tackle different forms of violence against women and girls. According to the World Bank Women, Business and the Law 2.0, out of the 46 Asia-Pacific countries and territories with data, only 22 have legislation that addresses domestic violence, 19 have legislation on sexual harassment, 15 have legislation on child marriage, and 2 have legislation on femicide.[78] Data from the WHO Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Policy Portal reveal that, among the 51 Asia-Pacific countries and territories with relevant information, only 17 explicitly criminalize marital rape, reflecting broader challenges in achieving gender equality and ensuring the autonomy and agency of all individuals within marriage.[79]

Alarmingly, the "marry your rapist" laws prevalent in some countries in the region allow rapists to evade punishment by marrying their victims. This deeply troubling legal provision not only fails to provide justice for victims/survivors but also perpetuates further harm by forcing them into marriage with the offenders. Efforts to abolish such laws are crucial to promote gender equality, protect human rights and ensure justice for victims/survivors of sexual violence. In 2021, there were still 20 countries and territories across the globe, including 5 in the Asia-Pacific region, that had some form of legislation allowing rapists to evade punishment by marrying their victims.[80]

A few Asia-Pacific countries, such as **Australia**, **Fiji** and **Solomon Islands**, have formulated legislation and policies that comprehensively protect women and girls from various forms of violence, as measured by SDG indicator 5.1.1.[81] In **Fiji**, eliminating violence against women and girls is codified in laws such as the Employment Relations Act 2007, Crimes Act 2009, Criminal Procedures Act 2009, Domestic Violence Act 2009 and Family Law Amendment Act 2012. In 2023, the Fiji National Action Plan to Prevent Violence against All Women and Girls 2023–2028 was launched. This costed and evidence-based action plan underscores a whole-of-government and whole-

of-society approach. The Government pledges to set up a national Coordination and Implementation Unit with dedicated human and financial resources.[82]

Pioneering legislative efforts are also observed in other Asia-Pacific countries. For example, the **Lao People's Democratic Republic** took the initial step of ratifying a law in 2015 that focuses on preventing and combating violence against women and children. This law effectively criminalizes marital rape and establishes strict prohibitions against any form of direct or indirect discrimination towards women and girls.[83] More recently, the country further demonstrated its commitment by creating the Second National Plan of Action on Preventing and Elimination of Violence Against Women and Violence against Children (2021–2025), and then integrating it into the plans of several provinces, ministries and judiciary bodies.[84]

In **Japan**, the parliament expanded legal protection against additional forms of GBV by passing revisions to the Sex Crime Penal Code and adopting the Act on Punishment of Acts/Offenses Relating to Non-Consensual Sexual Photography in 2023. "Acts such as photographing sexual appearances against their will or providing the record to a third party" are now considered sexual crimes. The country also strengthened the protection system for victims/survivors through the Act on the Prevention of Spousal Violence and the Protection of Victims and the Act on Support for Women Facing Difficulties.[85]

In **Papua New Guinea**, in response to widespread sorcery accusations leading to violence against women and girls, sorcery accusation-related violence was criminalized in 2022.[86] It has also set up institutional mechanisms to combat violence against women and girls. In 2022, a Permanent Parliamentary Committee on Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment and Gender-Based Violence was established, replacing the Special Parliamentary Committee on Gender-Based Violence. This new committee is tasked with examining the role of the National Council of Women, holding public hearings,

78 World Bank, "Women, Business and the Law Data, women's safety", database. Available at https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/safety (accessed on 10 July 2024).

79 WHO, "Sexual and reproductive health and rights policy portal", database. Available at https://platform.who.int/data/sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights/national-policies/srh/explicitly-criminalize-marital-rape (accessed on 10 July 2024).

80 UNFPA, *My Body Is My Own: Claiming the Right to Autonomy and Self-determination* (New York, 2021).

81 Australia, Fiji and Solomon Islands achieved a full score (100 out of 100) in the assessment of legal frameworks on addressing violence against women in 2022. ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicators by SDG: 5.1.1 – Legal frameworks on gender equality", database. Available at https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 16 February 2024).

82 Fiji, Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, *National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls 2023-2028* (Suva, 2023) and UN-Women, "Fiji National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls 2023-2028", web page. Available at https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/09/fiji-national-action-plan-to-prevent-violence-against-all-women-and-girls-2023-2028 (accessed on 16 February 2024).

83 Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children, "Legal ban on violence against children", web page. Available at: https://www.violenceagainstchildren.org/legal-ban (accessed on 2 August 2024).

84 UNFPA, "UNFPA Lao PDR integrates national policies for gender equality and ending violence against women and children into provincial, ministerial and sectoral plans", press release, 10 November 2021. Available at: https://lao.unfpa.org/en/news/lao-pdr-integrates-national-policies-gender-equality-and-ending-violence-against-women-and (accessed on 5 June 2024).

85 Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *National Report on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (Tokyo, 2024).

86 International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), *Violence Against Women in Elections in Papua New Guinea: An IFES Assessment* (Arlington, 2023).

reporting to the National Parliament and overseeing the Government's implementation of the National Strategy on Gender-Based Violence.[87]

In response to the emerging challenges of technology-facilitated violence, **Australia** has established the world's first government agency dedicated to online safety, the eSafety Commissioner (eSafety). Exercising its regulatory power under the Enhancing Online Safety Act 2015, eSafety has a team comprising policy analysts, investigators, lawyers, educators, technology experts, digital specialists and other professionals, addressing violence across all platforms such as private messaging apps, video gaming platforms and dating websites. eSafety operates with a holistic framework that includes three pillars: prevention through research, education programmes and awareness-raising; protection through regulatory schemes and investigations; and proactive and systemic change through tracking technology trends, supporting industries in improving user safety standards and strengthening cross-border impacts. It has designed online safety guidance specifically for women, children, youth, older persons, and parents and carers.[88]

4.4.2 Investing in holistic prevention measures

Prevention, addressing the structural causes and other risk factors that interact with gender inequality to increase the likelihood of GBV, is critical to eliminate violence against women and girls. Effective prevention necessitates a holistic approach that implements a broad range of activities to facilitate change at the individual, interpersonal, community and societal levels.[89] There is growing evidence that awareness-raising campaigns alone are insufficient to prevent violence. In line with the WHO RESPECT framework, prevention measures encompass, for example, engaging women and men in strengthening relationship skills; promoting the economic and social empowerment of women and girls; providing comprehensive services for victims/survivors; alleviating women's poverty; building safe schools, work environments and public spaces; preventing child and adolescent abuse; and transforming harmful gender attitudes, beliefs, norms and stereotypes, including through comprehensive sexuality education.[90]

In **Cambodia**, the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence against Women 2019–2023 identifies prevention as one of the four strategic areas, focusing on issues related to coordination and cooperation, education and youth, family and children, community and workplace, and culture and media.[91] Among the National Action Plan's key achievements, there has been progress in the development and implementation of minimum services standards and guidelines, operating procedures, as well as training packages for prevention and response services. The country reconfirmed its commitment by planning the formulation of a new national action plan for 2024–2030, prioritizing the development and implementation of legal frameworks and policies to prevent different forms of violence against women and girls, as well as campaigns and digital platforms to provide prevention and response services to victims/survivors.[92]

In **the Philippines**, the Inter-Agency Council on Violence Against Women and Children published the 2017-2022 Strategic Plan on Violence against Women and Children, recognizing prevention measures' primary role in countering violence.[93] Furthermore, the country focused on advocacy actions by launching information campaigns on cyber media. For instance, the Philippine Commission on Women holds the weekly radio segment "Tinig ng Kababaihan" (Women's Voices) to raise public awareness of government efforts to promote gender equality and women's human rights, addressing among other topics violence against women and girls and its prevention.[94]

87 Papua New Guinea, Permanent Parliamentary Committee on Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment and Gender-Based Violence, "Parliament establishes new permanent committee on gender equality, women's empowerment and GBV", press release, 24 November 2022. Available at: https://www.unitedforequalitypng.com/gewe-parl-comm#:~:text=On%201%20December%202022%2C%20the%2011th%20Parliament%20established,the%20lives%20of%20women%20and%20girls%20across%20PNG (accessed on 2 August 2024) and Papua New Guinea, Permanent Parliamentary Committee on Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment and Gender-Based Violence, "PNG parliamentarians to end GBV: Key activities", web page. Available at https://www.unitedforequalitypng.com/gewe-parl-comm (accessed on 2 August 2024).

88 ESCAP, "Leveraging digital innovation for inclusive and sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific", social development working paper (Bangkok, 2023); Council of Europe, "The digital dimension of violence against women as addressed by the seven mechanisms of the EDVAW Platform", thematic paper of the Platform of Independent Expert on Discrimination and Violence against Women (EDVAW) (Strasbourg, 2022); and eSafety Commissioner, "About us", web page. Available at https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us (accessed on 16 February 2024).

89 UN-Women, Generation Equality and the Equality Institute, *Together for Prevention: Handbook on Multisectoral National Action Plans to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls* (New York, 2023).

90 WHO, *RESPECT Women: Preventing Violence against Women* (Geneva, 2019).

91 UN-Women, Generation Equality and the Equality Institute, *Together for Prevention: Handbook on Multisectoral National Action Plans to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls* (New York, 2023).

92 Cambodia, Ministry of Women's Affairs, *National Report on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (Phnom Penh, 2024).

93 Philippines, Inter-Agency Council on Violence Against Women and Their Children, *Strategic Plan on Violence Against Women and Their Children 2017-2022,* (Manila, 2018).

94 Philippine, Commission on Women, "2023 Tinig ng Kababaihan", web page. Available at https://pcw.gov.ph/2023-tinig-ng-kababaihan/ (accessed on 2 August 2024).

ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Women and its mid-term review

The ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Women (RPA on EVAW) 2016-2025 guides the implementation of the ASEAN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and Children, adopted in 2013. This plan translates global commitments into regional and national strategies to achieve the SDGs, particularly gender equality and women's empowerment (SDG 5). The Regional Plan of Action represents a joint commitment by ASEAN member States and is grounded in principles such as a human rights-based approach, multi-sectoral collaboration, evidence-based strategies, due diligence, and partnerships and collaboration. The plan addresses the challenges faced by ASEAN member States in combating violence against women and girls through concrete actions aimed at strengthening prevention and response mechanisms.

ASEAN and UN-Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific conducted a mid-term review of the Regional Plan of Action from 2019 to 2021. They found that progress included the completion of the ASEAN Regional Guidelines on Violence against Women and Girls Data Collection and Use, published in 2018, and a regional media campaign to end violence against women and girls and combat trafficking in persons. Gender-sensitive guidelines for supporting women victims/survivors of trafficking were developed, and workshops for frontline personnel were held. Four ASEAN member States have national action plans on ending violence against women. Seven member States used national population-based surveys for violence prevalence data. Legal reforms were underway in many member States to improve protection for women victims/survivors and enhance their access to justice, while national programmes to prevent violence against women and girls were being developed and implemented across the region. Promising developments also include better protection for women migrant workers, with several ASEAN member States advancing their legal frameworks to combat violence against women and girls and trafficking.

Continued efforts are needed to achieve progress in eliminating violence against women and girls, such as refining the Regional Plan of Action indicators, developing standardized monitoring frameworks, and enhancing national action plans. Efforts should also focus on addressing violence against women and girls in vulnerable situations, improving data collection and analysis, aligning laws with international frameworks, and increasing technical capacities for effective violence prevention and response. The review encouraged ASEAN member States to build on their progress to fully implement the Regional Plan of Action in the next five years, with the Mid-Term Review providing a framework for accelerated action.[1]

1   ASEAN and UN-Women, *Ending Violence against Women in ASEAN Member States Mid-Term Review of the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Women* (ASEAN RPA on EVAW 2016-2025) (Jakarta, 2021).

India has driven the overall progress in reducing child marriage in South Asia.[95] Effective efforts to eliminate child marriage included supporting girls' schooling through conditional cash or in-kind transfers, complemented by training in gender transformative life skills and access to sexual and reproductive health services.[96] There is growing evidence that interventions in the areas of income and economic strengthening, as well as education and life skills, have shown significant positive effects on preventing child marriage.[97] **Azerbaijan** has introduced targeted professional skills courses and employment support for women from groups at risk of trafficking in persons.[98] Additionally, the country approved a National Action Plan on the Prevention of Gender-biased Sex Selection for 2020-2025, envisaging a study for the assessment of the phenomenon, as well as a revision of the existing reproductive health legislation.[99]

Transforming harmful gender norms and stereotypes necessitates close partnership with the media industry and the engagement of men and boys. The media industry plays a vital role in forming social cognition of violence against women and girls. Media reporting may significantly contribute to the normalization of violence. On the other hand, it also holds the potential to inform on the underlying causes of violence against women and girls, advocate for positive social and gender norms and assist in risk mitigation by providing crucial information to victims/survivors and persons seeking to support them. Improvements in media

95   UNICEF, *A Profile of Child Marriage in South Asia* (New York, 2023).

96   ESCAP, *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2023: Championing Sustainability Despite Adversities* (United Nations Publication, 2023).

97   Gillian Mann and Manahil Siddiqi, "Evidence synthesis on interventions to prevent child marriage and support girls' health and wellbeing", background paper for the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage Phase III Design Workshop (Johannesburg, 2023).

98   United Nations, "Trafficking in women and girls: crises as a risk multiplier, Report of the Secretary-General", A/77/292 (New York, 2022).

99   Azerbaijan, *National Report on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (Baku, 2024).

portrayal can also contribute to ending violence against women and girls through various strategies, such as increased coverage of relevant topics, factual highlighting of the seriousness and negative impacts on women and girls, and meaningful collaboration with psychologists and other experts to inform media coverage with evidence-based approaches.[100]

The National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence (2017-2021) of **Timor-Leste** emphasizes the media's role in promoting gender equality and zero tolerance towards GBV. It includes developing a gender-sensitive reporting code of conduct, mandatory annual training on human rights and gender-sensitive reporting and creating a media tool to monitor the portrayal of women and girls and reporting on GBV. The country approved a new national action plan for the period 2022–2032, where it reiterated the important role of media in violence prevention.[101] Similarly, the Press Council of **Pakistan**, which includes members from the print media and civil society, has a code of ethics addressing content that incites hatred against women and girls and prevents the identification of sexual offense victims/survivors.[102] The Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women of **China** explicitly protects women's rights to name, privacy, personal information and other personality rights. It requires media coverage of incidents involving women to be objective and have the consent of the women to include her portraits in advertisements, newspapers, electronic publications and other materials.[103]

Men and boys can act as agents of change in violence prevention and response by challenging harmful gender norms and stereotypes that perpetuate violence and inequality. They can promote healthy, respectful relationships by actively intervening when they witness or suspect instances of violence, and by serving as positive role models for their peers and younger generations. Engaging men and boys as allies in advocacy efforts and educational initiatives can foster collective action towards ending violence against women and girls and creating a safer, more equitable society for all. In 2020, the **Fiji** Women's Crisis Centre developed the Male Advocacy for Women's Human Rights and Against Violence Against Women programme, commonly known as the Male Advocacy

programme, which is utilized in the Cook Islands, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu. This initiative aims to engage men in self-reflection on their behaviours regarding gender inequality and violence against women and girls and empower men to support violence prevention and response efforts.[104]

4.4.3 Providing multi-sectoral and victim/survivor-centred services

The provision and coordination of health, social, police, justice and other essential services mitigate the consequences of violence on the well-being of women and girls, assist in their recovery and empowerment and prevent violence from reoccurring.[105] A victim/survivor-centred approach places the rights, wishes needs, safety, dignity and well-being of victims/survivors at the centre of all violence prevention and response efforts.[106] Service providers without the appropriate skills and sensitivities could profoundly affect victims/survivors of violence. Without proper training, service providers may inadvertently retraumatize victims/survivors, fail to recognize signs of abuse, or provide ineffective interventions, ultimately hindering the ability of victims/survivors to access assistance and recover from their experiences.

Some Governments have placed an increased emphasis on multi-sectoral and victim/survivor-centred services for women and girls subjected to violence. For example, in **Tajikistan**, frontline GBV health service providers have been trained in offering health and psychosocial services to violence victims/survivors, coordinating referrals with other service providers to meet comprehensive needs, and understanding national legislation and rights of victims/survivors.[107] In **Türkiye**, Violence Prevention and Monitoring Centers offer psychosocial, legal, educational, vocational, health, and economic support, along with counselling and referral services to victims/survivors of violence. In 2023, the centres served 313,475 individuals, including 273,222 women, 28,352 men and 11,901 children.[108] In **Viet Nam**, members of local gender-based violence rapid response teams, law enforcement officers, prosecutors and judges

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100 UN-Women and UNICEF, *Mapping the nexus between media reporting of violence against girls*, report (New York, 2022).

101 Timor-Leste, Secretariat of State for Equality, *National Report on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (Dili, 2024).

102 UNESCO and UN-Women, *The Big Conversation: Handbook to Address Violence against Women in and through the Media* (Paris and New York, 2019).

103 China, Ministry of Justice, *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women*. Available at: http://en.moj.gov.cn/2023-12/15/c_948362.htm (accessed on 2 August 2024).

104 UN-Women, "Best practices for engaging men and boys in preventing violence against women and girls", press release, 7 December 2020. Available at https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2021/02/best-practices-for-engaging-men-and-boys-in-preventing-violence-against-women-and-girls (accessed on 2 August 2024).

105 UN-Women, *How-To Guide: Developing and Implementing National Gender-Based Violence Multisector Service Delivery Protocols: Lessons from the Pacific* (Suva, 2022).

106 Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), "IASC Definition and Principles of a victim/survivor centred approach", web page. Available at https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-champion-protection-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-and-sexual-harassment/iasc-definition-principles-victimsurvivor-centered-approach-0 (accessed on 2 August 2023).

107 UNFPA, "UNFPA implementation of the Essential Services Package for women and girls subject to violence: A consultation report", report (New York, 2022).

108 Türkiye, *National Report on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (Ankara, 2024).

have been sensitized to gender-responsive delivery of essential services to violence victims/survivors. In addition, three one-stop service centres have been established in Da Nang, Ho Chi Minh City and Thanh Hoa to provide integrated essential services for GBV victims/survivors.[109] In **the Islamic Republic of Iran**, one-stop centres have been set up to provide medical, psychosocial and legal support for trafficking victims/survivors.[110] In **the Republic of Korea**, the Digital Sex Crime Victim Support Center offers comprehensive support, including counselling, legal assistance and technological support for digital content deletion, to victims/survivors of digital sex crimes.[111]

It is important for communication regarding these services to reach a broad audience, including victims/survivors and women and girls vulnerable to violence, empowering them to seek support from trained professionals and organizations, navigate resources effectively, and ultimately break the cycle of violence while promoting their recovery and rights. Improving the accessibility of such services to population groups in vulnerable situations, such as women with disabilities and women migrants, and continuing service provision during times of crisis are equally important.

Women's organizations play a critical role in violence prevention and response by providing essential services, such as shelters, counselling, legal assistance and hotlines, to support victims/survivors in rebuilding their lives, including in the context of conflicts and disasters. In addition, these organizations drive policy changes by advocating for comprehensive legislation and social norms that protect women and girls, ensuring that their voices are heard in both domestic and global policymaking. Furthermore, by empowering women and girls through education and community initiatives, women's organizations reduce the incidence of violence, transform gender norms and foster resilience, making them indispensable in the fight against violence against women and girls.[112] **Armenia** annually allocated up to AMD 125 million to support women's organizations combating GBV, funding activities such as training, awareness campaigns, hotline services, social and psychological support, legal assistance, counselling, financial empowerment services and provision of accommodation for victims/survivors.[113]

4.4.4 Improving data collection and use on violence against women and girls

Reliable, regular, comparable and disaggregated data are essential for policymaking and programming aimed at eliminating violence against women and girls. Both quantitative and qualitative data can be utilized to understand issues at stake and inform evidence-based and culturally specific interventions, including raising awareness about violence against women and girls and advocating for change.[114] The safety and privacy of the victims/survivors must be prioritized in data collection endeavours. The collection of administrative data is particularly challenging as many victims/survivors do not report violence cases because they do not know how to report and are afraid of repercussions. When victims/survivors do report, they find the staff are not trained to support them. Efforts to improve data collection need to be victim/survivor-centred. To this end, building the capacities of officers and increasing women's participation and leadership in the police and justice sectors are of crucial significance.[115]

In **Indonesia**, the National Commission on Violence against Women annually sends out a standard survey to around 700 to 1,000 government agencies and CSOs that provide essential services for women and girls experiencing violence. In addition to analysing the survey data, the Commission collects summary administrative data from at least 30 per cent of the 700–1,000 government agencies and CSOs and publishes an annual report on violence reporting and service provision.[116] The **New Zealand** Crime and Victims Survey collects information about crime experiences, including interpersonal violence and violence by family members, on an annual basis starting from 2018. The Ministry of Justice publishes research reports, fact sheets, justice statistics data tables and other research outcomes to enhance the evidence base on family violence and sexual violence.[117] In May 2021, **Papua New Guinea** launched Primero, an online and offline case and information management system to support social welfare workforce in the management of protection-related data and violence-related cases, while ensuring accurate data collection and analysis.[118]

109 United Nations Viet Nam, "2022 UN Country Annual Results Report, Viet Nam", report (Hanoi, 2023).

110 United Nations, "Trafficking in women and girls: crises as a risk multiplier, Report of the Secretary-General", A/77/292 (New York, 2022).

111 United Nations, "Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, Report of the Secretary-General", A/77/302 (New York, 2022).

112 UN-Women, "How funding women's organizations prevents violence against women", news, 2023. Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/explainer/2023/11/why-funding-womens-organizations-prevents-violence-against-women (accessed on 2 August 2024).

113 Armenia, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, *National Report on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (Erevan, 2024).

114 UNFPA, *A Guide to Better Understanding and Using Violence against Women Prevalence Data: Illustrated with A Case Study on Partner Violence in the Pacific Region* (New York, 2023).

115 UN-Women and WHO, *Improving the Collection and Use of Administrative Data on Violence against Women: Global Technical Guidance* (New York and Geneva, 2022).

116 UN-Women, *ASEAN Regional Guidelines on Violence against Women and Girls Data Collection and Use* (New York, 2018).

117 Government of New Zealand, Ministry of Justice, "Research and data", web page. Available at https://www.justice.govt.nz/justice-sector-policy/research-data/ (accessed on 19 February 2024).

118 United Nations Spotlight Initiative, "The EU - UN Spotlight Initiative supports launch of easy-to-use information management platform for social welfare workforce in Papua New Guinea", blog, 28 May 2021. Available at: https://www.spotlightinitiative.org/press/eu-un-spotlight-initiative-supports-launch-easy-use-information-management-platform-social (accessed on 2 August 2024).

A group of young people unite at Angkor Wat to say no to violence against women during the Siem Reap Race, part of the 16 Days campaign in Cambodia. © Niels den Hollander

4.5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The prevalence of violence against women and girls remains alarmingly high in the Asia-Pacific region. Despite progress in preventing and responding to GBV, challenges in eliminating all forms of violence often stem from gaps in legal and policy frameworks and poor implementation; deeply rooted harmful social norms, beliefs and behaviours; limited access to quality, coordinated and comprehensive services for victims/survivors; and lack of reliable, regular, comparable and disaggregated data and underutilization of existing data.[119] Moreover, efforts to tackle GBV to date have primarily centred on responding to violence and providing services for victims/survivors, while systematic long-term prevention has received relatively less attention and investment.[120] In addition to addressing the abovementioned challenges, an evaluation approach should be undertaken to learn from past experiences and support evidence-driven investment in interventions that have been proven effective.

Importantly, adequate funding and resources for violence prevention and response are crucial for empowering women and girls and promoting gender equality. Current funding levels are insufficient, falling short of what is necessary to effectively address and mitigate the impacts of violence on women and girls. To improve investment, Governments will need to engage in gender-responsive budgeting, funding for women's organizations and greater investments in multi-sectoral and victim/survivor-centred services. Among OECD official development assistance in 2021-2022, less than 1 per cent was focused on ending violence against women and girls.[121] International cooperation should also be strengthened to ensure financial resources are allocated to support initiatives on eliminating violence and protecting the rights of women and girls.

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119 United Nations, "Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, Report of the Secretary-General", A/77/302 (New York, 2022).

120 UN-Women, "UN Women Asia-Pacific Regional Strategy on VAW Prevention 2020–2025", draft (Bangkok, 2023) and UN Women, "Partnering to end violence against women in the Asia Pacific region: UN Women-DFAT strategic partnership framework", brief (Bangkok, 2023).

121 OECD, *Development finance for gender equality and women's empowerment*. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/development/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-topics/development-finance-for-gender-equality-and-women-s-empowerment.htm (accessed 29 May 2024).

Balochi dancers say no to violence against women and girls in Pakistan during 16 days of activism against GBV. © UN-Women/Henriette Bjoerge

Governments, in partnership with civil society organizations, private sector entities and other stakeholders, may wish to consider the following overarching recommendations on eliminating violence against women and girls:

+ Develop laws, policies and action plans that align with CEDAW, and general recommendations adopted by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women to prohibit all forms of violence, including in digital contexts and during times of crisis, hold perpetrators accountable and strengthen recourse and remedies for victims/survivors of violence.

+ Enhance cooperation with the technology sector, women's organizations and national human rights institutions to ensure that technology companies and intermediaries establish and enforce policies, codes of conduct for platform users and consistent standards for content moderation, while promoting gender-responsive design of products and services, to prevent and respond to technology-facilitated violence against women and girls.

+ Identify the roles and responsibilities of government agencies and other relevant stakeholders, allocate adequate funding and resources, and establish accountability mechanisms to monitor the implementation of laws, policies and programmes on eliminating violence against women and girls.

+ Monitor and evaluate interventions to address violence against women and girls, with active engagement of victims/survivors, to identify effective measures and inform evidence-based policymaking and programming in line with national and local contexts.

+ Invest in long-term prevention measures to address the root causes of violence and mitigate risk factors for perpetration, especially harmful social norms and gender stereotypes, at the individual, interpersonal, community and societal levels, with close involvement of men and boys.

+ Enhance comprehensive, coordinated intersectional and victim/survivor-centred services to meet the diverse needs of victims/survivors of violence across the health, social services, justice and policing sectors, including in the context of conflicts and disasters.

+ Strengthen disaggregated data collection, research and utilization to understand the extent, patterns, trends and impacts of various and intersecting forms of violence, especially technology-facilitated violence, with due consideration given to the safety and privacy of victims/survivors.

+ Engage and invest in women's organizations and women human rights defenders in violence prevention and response efforts, including through increasing their participation in decision-making and building the technical and financial capacities of these organizations.

+ Foster constructive dialogues and encourage coordinated actions among diverse stakeholders, including governments at all administrative levels, the media, cultural, religious and community leaders, the private sector and development partners, to effectively combat violence against women and girls.

CHAPTER 5

Meaningful participation and gender-responsive governance

Tanzila Narbaeva, Chairperson of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan and Chairperson of the Central Asia Women Leaders Caucus, and Matilda Dimovska, UNDP Resident Representative in Uzbekistan delivered welcoming speeches at the opening of the regional training camp for girls on leadership, mentoring and gender equality in Central Asia. © UNDP

KEY MESSAGES

Gender-responsive governance and the meaningful participation of women and girls from diverse backgrounds in public life are critical to change gender social norms and achieve gender equality.

Decision-making and leadership

Progress has been made towards increasing women's political representation and participation in Asia and the Pacific. However, women remain underrepresented in leadership and decision-making roles across all branches and levels of government, as well as in the private sector.

When women reach political leadership and decision-making roles, gender stereotypes continue to confine them to functions and roles perceived as "feminine," such as those responsible for matters related to gender, women, children and family.

In the legislative branch,

+ Only around one in five parliamentary seats in the Asia-Pacific region is held by a woman in 2024.[1] Women's representation is the highest in **South-East Asia** (23.2 per cent) and the lowest in **South and South-West Asia** (17.2 per cent). The region is making slower progress towards increasing women's representation in parliaments compared to the rest of the world.

+ Women are heavily underrepresented in top parliamentary leadership positions. Five out of six speakers are male.[2] Women rarely chair parliamentary committees other than those explicitly dealing with gender equality.[3]

+ In Asia and the Pacific, 19 out of 49 countries with available data have electoral quotas in place.[4]

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1 ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicator by theme: Seats held by women in national parliaments (% of seats) 2000 – 2024", database. Available at https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed 14 June 2024).

2 ESCAP elaboration based on Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline, "Indicator: Specialized bodies: March 2024", database. Available at: https://data.ipu.org/ (accessed 22 March 2024).

3 Ibid.

4 Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline, Indicator: Electoral Quota for women", database. Available at: https://data.ipu.org/ (accessed 22 March 2024).

In the executive branch,

+ Among the 46 countries and territories with data, on average, seven out of eight government ministers were men in 2023.[5]
+ Women are overrepresented as ministers of gender equality, family and children affairs, but underrepresented in every other ministerial portfolio.
+ In local governments, women's representation is generally higher compared to the national level, yet none of the 39 Asia-Pacific countries and territories with available data have achieved gender parity.[6]

In the judiciary,

+ About 3 in 10 judges or magistrates in the region are women, with large variations across the 23 countries and territories with available data.[7]

Across the private and public sectors, **women remain underrepresented in managerial positions**, especially in middle and senior management.

+ Gender parity has been achieved in four Asia-Pacific countries. In 20 out of 49 Asia-Pacific countries and territories with data, the proportion of managerial positions held by women fell below the world average of 28 per cent.[8]
+ In 17 out of 41 countries and territories, women held less than 25 per cent of middle and senior management positions.[9]
+ Women govern only 16 per cent of central banks and are CEOs in 12 per cent of commercial banks around the world in 2023.[10]
+ The female to male ratio of business directors in 11 Asia-Pacific countries with data ranged from a low of 14.5 per cent to a high of 87.9 per cent in 2022. The gender gaps narrowed in the majority of these countries between 2014 and 2022.

Increased use of **affirmative measures** is needed, including temporary special measures such as electoral quotas and reserved seats, capacity building and peer-to-peer support for women in politics, community mobilization aimed to transform gender social norms and misconceptions about women's leadership capacity, and tackling gender-based violence and threats to women in politics.

Gender-responsive governance

National women's machineries serve as one of the key channels for prioritizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in a country's political and development agenda, protecting their rights across all sectors, and facilitating gender mainstreaming across the government. However, they are often marginalized within government systems.

+ In 24 Asia-Pacific countries and territories, the machinery is led at ministerial level and the leader has a seat in cabinet. In 5 countries and territories, the national machinery is led by the head of the executive branch of government or its head reports directly to the head of the executive.
+ National women's machineries often inadequately represent diverse groups of women and girls, especially those facing intersectional challenges such as women and girls with disabilities and indigenous women and girls.
+ Many national women's machineries in the region are underfunded and understaffed.

5   ESCAP elaboration based on Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN-Women, "Women in Politics 2023", infographic (Geneva and New York, 2023). Available at https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/infographics/2023-03/women-in-politics-2023 (accessed on 22 March 2024).

6   ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicator by SDG: 5.5.1 Proportion of elected seats held by women in deliberative bodies of local government (%), most recent year", database. Available at: https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 29 May 2024).

7   ESCAP elaboration based on 23 ESCAP members and associate members in data UNODC, "Indicator professional judges or magistrate, by sex and most recent year", database. Available at: https://dataunodc.un.org/dp-cjs-personnel (accessed on 11 May 2024).

8   ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicator by SDG: 5.5.2 - Proportion of women in managerial positions", database. Available at: https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 18 June 2024).

9   Ibid.

10 Official Monetary and Financial Institutions Forum, *Gender Balance Index 2024: Missed opportunities* (London, 2024).

Women's civil society organizations (CSOs) play a pivotal role in the development and implementation of the BPfA.

✚ Shrinking civic spaces, coupled with a backlash against gender equality, hampers the meaningful engagement of CSOs.

✚ Youth-led organizations need additional support and resources if they are to deliver gender-transformative action.

Integrating gender considerations into all stages of the budget cycle is a strategic political and technical exercise. It can support a fair distribution of resources, foster a sense of justice and strengthen government accountability.

✚ Only one-third of countries in Eastern Asia and South-Eastern Asia and 20 per cent of countries in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand)[11] have comprehensive systems to track **budget allocations for gender equality**.[12]

✚ Gender analysis and gender impact assessment are yet to be fully integrated into public finance management systems in most countries in the region.[13]

Accelerated efforts are needed to address legislative and institutional barriers, capacity gaps, biases and harmful gender social norms that impede gender-equal, inclusive and participatory governance. Equally imperative is to close gender data gaps and the use this data to inform effective gender-responsive budgeting.

5.1 OVERVIEW

Meaningful participation of women and girls in political, economic and social life means that they can exercise their agency, leadership and experiences to influence all matters in the broader development and humanitarian contexts. This is one of the central issues of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Gender-responsive governance requires institutional mechanisms, planning and budgeting processes within the government to be set up in such a way that holds governments accountable for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. This means enabling meaningful participation and leadership of women and girls in policy- and decision-making, providing avenues for engaging women's groups and civil society actors in participatory governance processes, and performing gender-responsive budgeting and monitoring the outcomes of such budgets. Gender-equal and inclusive representation in public life and gender-responsive governance are critical levers of change for gender social norms.

Increasingly, it is important to acknowledge and advocate for equal and inclusive decision-making, highlighting not only gender parity but also the inclusion of women and girls from diverse backgrounds. The intersectional approach has always been embedded in the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action and other international instruments such as the Convention of the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and various

treaties and United Nations resolutions that call for equal rights and meaningful participation of women and girls facing intersecting forms of discrimination due to the inextricable linkages between gender and other factors such as sexual orientation and gender identity, age, race, ethnicity, religion or belief, disability, indigenous, rural and migrant status. Yet such considerations cannot be an afterthought. More deliberate actions and measures, such as special inclusive measures, financial allocations, accessibility and reasonable accommodation, are required to put inclusive representation into legislation, policies and practice. **The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)** (BPfA) calls for strategic actions with regard to women in power and decision-making (critical area of concern G) and institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women (critical area of concern H). These critical areas are aligned with the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, particularly SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) and SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals). The **Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)** has adopted agreed conclusions at their recent sessions that provide important guidance on how to create an enabling environment for women's full and effective participation in decision-making: strengthening the voice, agency and leadership of all women and girls. The **agreed conclusions of the sixty-fifth session in 2021** urges Governments and all stakeholders to strengthen relevant normative, legal and regulatory

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11   See Annex 2 for regional groupings.

12   UN-Women, "Strengthening public finance management systems for gender equality and women's empowerment: Promising practices and remaining gaps", technical brief (New York, 2023).

13   Ibid.

frameworks, prevent and eliminate violence against women in public life, strengthen gender-responsive institutional reforms, increase financing in support of women's participation in public life, leave no women and girls behind, and address root causes and barriers to women's full and equal participation.[14]

The **agreed conclusions of the sixty-eighth session in 2024** further urges Governments and all stakeholders to integrate a gender perspective into financing for development commitments, including allocating adequate resources to promote the full, equal and meaningful participation of women and girls in all decision-making bodies at all levels of government and across sectors, strengthen institutional capacities and resources to implement gender-responsive economic and social policies, and engage and finance women's organization and collectives.[15] The **Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women** is elaborating a new **General Recommendation (No.40),** with the aim to adopt it at its 89th session in October 2024. This will provide guidance to States Parties on how to achieve equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems in both the public and private sectors. It will do so in the context of a global governance crisis induced by pandemics, climate change and protracted conflicts, and taking into consideration the critical impact digitalization and new technologies such as AI have on decision-making.[16]

Chapter 5 first reviews progress made and the current state of women's representation in all three branches of government – legislative, executive and judicial – as well as their representation in managerial positions in public and private sectors in the Asia-Pacific region. The chapter then discusses key institutions and actors, namely national women's machineries, national human rights institutions and women's civil society organizations (CSOs), as well as gender-responsive budgeting, that are the essential building blocks of gender-responsive governance to enable women's meaningful participation and ensure accountability for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

5.2 WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING AND LEADERSHIP

Strengthening women's participation in decision-making and leadership is a prerequisite for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. It is an important goal in itself and can also help support women's empowerment in other areas by influencing gender-responsive public policies and institutional practices. Women's participation has also been shown to carry numerous benefits, including diversifying policy agendas[17] and better and more inclusive policy outcomes.[18] Research on how well countries coped with the recent COVID-19 pandemic has found that women leaders at the national and subnational levels of government placed premiums on communicating clearly and acting early.[19] Responding rapidly to contain the virus, and prioritizing policies to address the pandemic's social and economic impacts, especially its disproportionate effects on vulnerable groups, were central to effective responses and recoveries.

Despite increasing public awareness and spotlight on the strong performance of women leaders, there remains a pernicious perception about women's capability of decision making. The 2023 Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI) reveals that nearly half of people worldwide believe that men make better political leaders than women do, and two out of five people believe that men make better business executives than women.[20] Furthermore, institutional barriers and social norms with regard to labour division between women and men continue to have significant effects on women's participation and leadership in public life. As a result, while notable progress has been made around the world and in Asia and the Pacific, most parliaments and decision-making bodies in the government remain male-dominated. When women reach leadership roles, they rarely lead ministerial portfolios or parliamentary committees other than those dealing explicitly with gender equality or women's empowerment.

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14 United Nations Economic and Social Council, "Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, Agreed conclusions of the sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women", E/CN.6/2021/L.3 (New York, 2021).

15 United Nations Economic and Social Council, "Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective, Agreed conclusions of the sixty-eighth session of the Commission on the Status of Women", E/CN.6/2024/L.3 (New York, 2024).

16 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Draft general recommendation No.40. on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems (18 July 2023 version)", draft document (Geneva, 2023). Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/draft-general-recommendation-no-40-equal-and#:~:text=Draft%20general%20recommendation%20No%2040.%20on%20the%20equal,world%20of%20the%20potential%20of%20half%20its%20population (accessed on 17 July 2024).

17 For example, studies have shown that, as the percentage of women in the parliamentary party increases, parties address a greater diversity of issues in their election campaigns. See Greene and O'Brien, "Diverse Parties, Diverse Agendas? Female Politicians and the Parliamentary Party's Role in Platform Formation", *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 55, No.3 (August 2016).

18 UNDP, "Breaking Down Gender Biases: Shifting social norms towards gender equality", 2023 Gender Social Norms Index (New York, 2023).

19 Jennifer M. Piscopo and Malliga Och, "Effective, Decisive, and Inclusive: Women's Leadership in COVID-19 Response and Recovery", UN-Women Working Paper (New York, 2021).

20 UNDP, "Breaking Down Gender Biases: Shifting social norms towards gender equality", 2023 Gender Social Norms Index (New York, 2023).

FIGURE 5.1   **Share of seats held by women in national parliaments, 2000–2024**
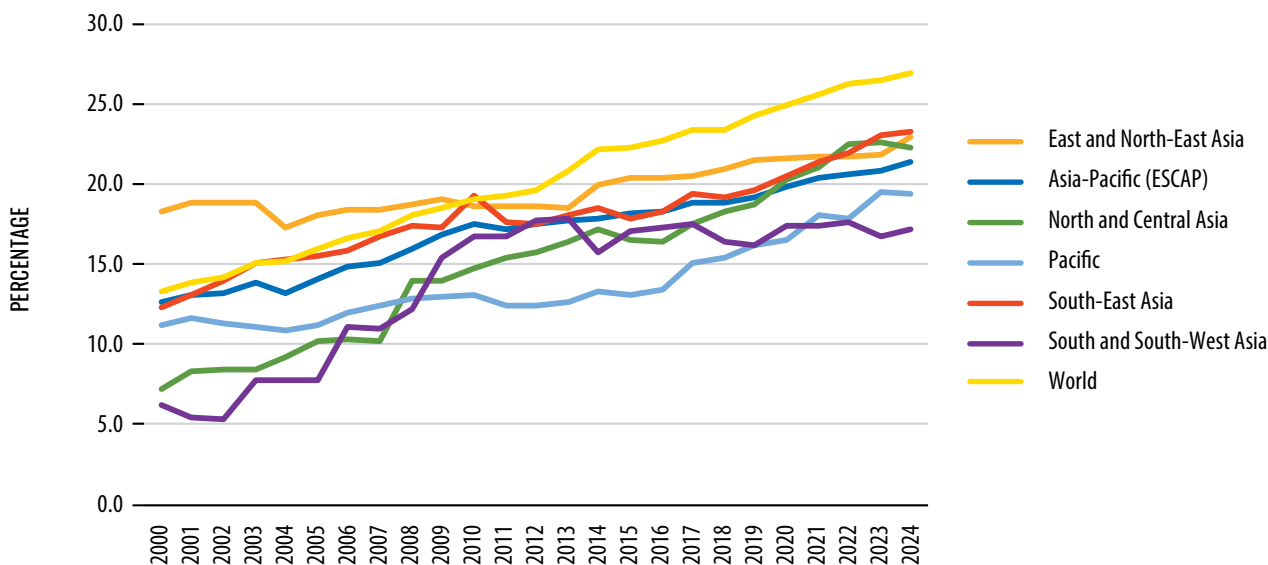
Source: ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicator by theme: women in national parliaments", database. Available at: https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 14 June 2024).

5.2.1   Legislative branch

National parliaments are often the most important lawmaking bodies in a country and a fundamental arena for political debate and decision-making. Their composition affects the political, economic and social direction of societies: when parliaments are representative of the broader population, the interests and perspectives of different groups are more likely to be reflected in policies and laws, contributing to good governance.[21]

In Asia and the Pacific, progress has been made towards increasing the proportion of women parliamentarians over the past three decades, but the pace of progress remains slow. On average, 21.4 per cent of parliamentary seats in the Asia-Pacific region were held by women in 2024, which is a long way from parity and below the global average of 26.9 per cent. **The region as a whole is not increasing the proportion of women in parliaments as rapidly as the rest of the world**. At the subregional level, the average share of women parliamentarians ranged from 23.2 per cent in South-East Asia to 17.2 per cent in South and South-West Asia in 2024. North and Central Asia, the Pacific and South-East Asia have made commendable progress since 2015, while the progress has slowed down in East and North-East Asia. The South and South-West Asia subregion achieved significant progress prior to 2015, but progress has stagnated ever since. (Figure 5.1).

At the country level, vast variations exist in the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women, ranging from as high as 45.5 per cent to zero, as of 1 April 2024. Seven out of 47 countries in the Asia-Pacific region had a share of women parliamentarians above 30 per cent (Armenia, Australia, Nepal, New Zealand, Timor-Leste, Uzbekistan and Viet Nam), with the high of **New Zealand** having 45.5 per cent of its parliamentary seats held by women. At the other end of the spectrum, in 12 countries in the region, mainly found in the Pacific and South and South-West Asia, women made up less than 10 per cent of the members of parliament.

Changes in women's representation in parliaments since 2020 paint a mixed picture. Out of the 47 ESCAP members and associate members included in the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Parline database, increases in women's share of parliamentary seats were observed in 31 countries between 2020 and 2024. Among these countries, gains of over 5 percentage points were evident in Armenia (13.0 percentage points), Australia (8.0 percentage points), Georgia (5.2 percentage points), the Marshall Islands (6.0 percentage points), the Federated States of Micronesia (15.4 percentage points) and Tajikistan (7.9 percentage points). On the other hand, the share of parliamentary seats held by women declined in 12 countries, with declines over 10 percentage points being evident in two countries (Figure 5.2).

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21   United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), "SDG indicator metadata: Indicator 5.5.1. Proportion of seats held by women in (a) national parliaments and (b) local governments", harmonized metadata template (formal version 1.1). Available at: https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/files/Metadata-05-05-01a.pdf (accessed 25 July 2024).

FIGURE 5.2 **Change (percentage point difference) in the proportion of women parliamentarians (1 January 2020 and 1 April 2024)**
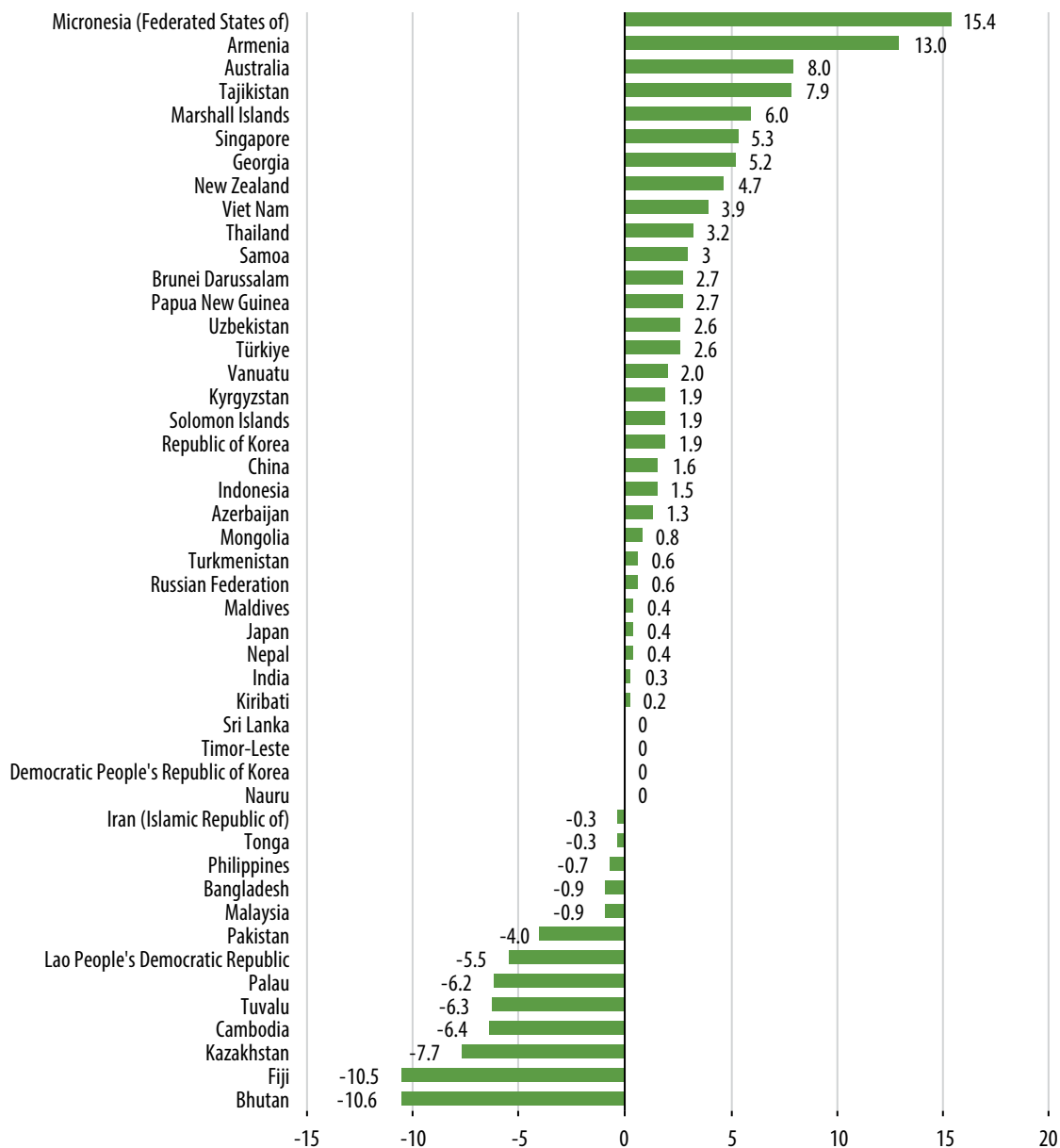
Source: ESCAP elaboration based on Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline database. "Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments", database. Available at https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/?date_year=2024&date_month=04 (accessed on 29 May 2024). Change was calculated based on comparison of the percentages of women in lower or single houses of parliaments as of 1 January 2020 and as of 1 April 2024 (except for Indonesia and the Islamic Republic of Iran where the latest data available were as of 1 February 2024 by the date of access).

Women are also underrepresented in parliamentary leadership positions. As of March 2024, only 10 out of the 62 speakers of parliaments across the Asia-Pacific region were women (16.1 per cent),[22] below the global average (24.2 per cent).[23] **Furthermore, women rarely chair parliamentary committees other than those explicitly dealing with gender equality issues** (Figure 5.3). Across the 46 Asia-Pacific countries with available data, the proportion of women committee chairs was 20.3 per cent (45 out of 221).[24] The lowest proportion of women committee chairs was observed in the committees on finance (8.3 per cent) and defence (9.3 per cent) (Figure 5.3). Interestingly, in the Pacific, the committees on finance (17.6 per cent) and defence (14.3 per cent) were the committees most likely to be chaired by women while no committee on human rights or gender equality was chaired by a woman.[25]

22 ESCAP elaboration based on Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline, "Indicator: speakers, as of March 2024", database. Available at: https://data.ipu.org/speakers (accessed on 22 March 2024). Data available for 49 ESCAP members, of which 3 members had vacant speaker positions.

23 Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline, "Indicator: speakers, as of March 2024", database. Available at: https://data.ipu.org/speakers (accessed on 22 March 2024).

24 Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline, "Indicator: specialized bodies, as of March 2024", database. Available at: https://data.ipu.org/specialized-bodies/March (accessed on 22 March 2024). Data available for 46 ESCAP members.

25 Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in parliament 2023* (Geneva, 2024).

FIGURE 5.3 **Share of women chairs in select parliamentary committees (%) (based on IPU data for 46 Asia-Pacific countries)**
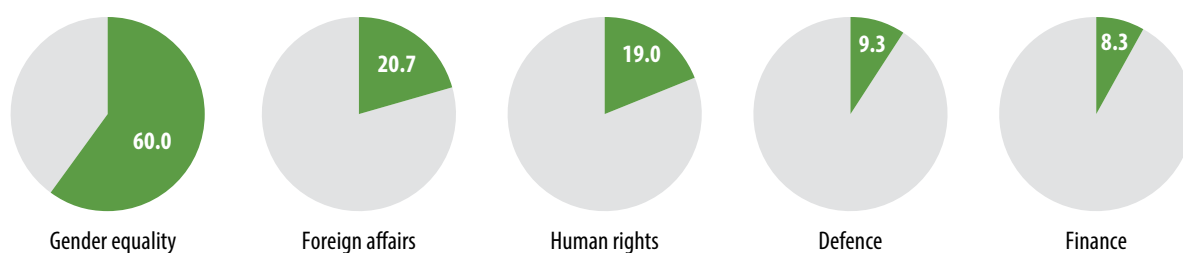
Gender equality	Foreign affairs	Human rights	Defence	Finance
60.0	20.7	19.0	9.3	8.3

Source: ESCAP elaboration based on Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline, "Indicator: specialized bodies", database. Available at: https://data.ipu.org/specialized-bodies/ (accessed on 22 March 2024).

Note: In cases where a committee covers more than one theme, such as foreign affairs and defence, the number of chairs have been counted in both categories.

BOX 5.1 **The initiative of the Federated States of Micronesia towards women's inclusion in national decision-making**

Most of the communities in the Federated States of Micronesia are matriarchal, with women managing economic resources and providing guidance to uphold the social status of extended families within the community.[1] However, this dynamic was not reflected in the national decision-making process; no parliamentary seat was held by a woman until 2021.[2]

Changes have taken place in recent years. In November 2021, the Federated States of Micronesia elected its first woman member of Parliament, the National Congress, when Perpetua S. Konman won the by-election. Following parliamentary elections in March 2023, Mrs. Konman was once again elected as a national senator, alongside another woman candidate, Dr. Merlin Abello-Alfonso, who became the second woman elected to the 13-member National Congress.[3]

These positive changes would not have been possible without a series of efforts made to increase women's representation in the national decision-making process. In 2018, the President of the Federated States of Micronesia, Peter Christian, endorsed the National Gender Policy,[4] which has the explicit goal of increasing the representation of women in political decision-making. The policy includes evaluating special legislative measures, preparing women for elections through mock congresses, striving for gender balance in government bodies and strengthening awareness campaigns.[5]

During the 23rd Micronesian Islands Forum in 2019, a National Gender Equality Committee was established to promote gender equality efforts in cooperation with neighbouring countries.[6] In the same spirit, the Government of the Federated States of Micronesia reiterated its commitment to increasing women's political participation and representation in its Beijing+25 national review report.[7] More recently, a national Gender Equality Framework was developed through the 25th Micronesian Islands Forum held in February 2023 to ensure the continuity of efforts to promote gender equality and change mentalities about women in politics.[8]

The introduction of women parliamentarians in the Federated States of Micronesia represents an initial step that could, if accompanied by sustained measures to increase women's representation, support progress towards gender parity in national decision-making processes in the country.

1   Policy Forum, "The election of Micronesia's first female senator", web page. Available at https://www.policyforum.net/the-election-of-micronesias-first-female-senator/ (accessed on 18 June 2024).
2   IPU Parline Database. Micronesia (Federated States of). https://data.ipu.org/node/111/elections (accessed 18 June 2024).
3   Ibid. There are currently 13 members in the National Congress.
4   UN-Women. (2022). Gender equality brief for Federated States of Micronesia. https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/12/gender-equality-brief-for-federated-states-of-micronesia.
5   Federated States of Micronesia, "National report submitted in accordance with paragraph 5 of the annex to Human Rights Council resolution 16/21", A/HRC/WG.6/37/FSM/1 (Geneva, 2021).
6   Pacific Community (2023). Micronesian leaders make gender equality a priority. https://www.spc.int/updates/news/media-release/2023/02/micronesian-leaders-make-gender-equality-a-priority.
7   UN-Women. (2022). Gender equality brief for Federated States of Micronesia. https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/12/gender-equality-brief-for-federated-states-of-micronesia.
8   Pacific Community (2023). Micronesian leaders make gender equality a priority. https://www.spc.int/updates/news/media-release/2023/02/micronesian-leaders-make-gender-equality-a-priority.

When designed and implemented in full spirit, the use of quotas is an effective means of increasing the proportion of women in parliament. In Asia and the Pacific, 19 out of 49 countries with available data have electoral quotas in place (for lower or unicameral chambers). Out of the 10 countries with the highest women's parliamentary representation in the region, 8 have an electoral quota for women. In contrast, almost none of the countries[26] with women's representation among parliamentarians below 10 per cent have any form of electoral quota in place.[27] Where both legislated and voluntary quotas exist and are used, and where there is a requirement to place women candidates at the top of candidate lists, quota systems are more likely to translate into high levels of women's representation.

Some countries in the region have introduced recent reforms regarding electoral quotas. For instance, **Mongolia** has set targets through constitutional and legal reforms to increase the electoral quota for women among candidates from the current 20 per cent to 30 per cent in 2024 and to 40 per cent in 2028.[28] **India** passed a landmark bill in 2023 to reserve one third of all seats for women in the lower chamber of the parliament, in the Delhi Legislative Assembly and in state legislative assemblies.[29] Furthermore, the type of electoral system appears to affect the level of women's representation in parliaments. Systems based on proportional representation[30] make it easier for women to get elected in comparison to electoral systems based on majority or plurality.[31]

Moreover, electoral quotas would only be effective in women's political participation if they were coupled with targeted capacity building for women in politics, policies and resource allocation within political parties to nominate, promote and support women candidates, and gender-responsive voter education to transform misconceptions about women's leadership capacity.

In addition to affirmative actions through the quota and electoral systems, addressing violence against women in politics is equally important to promote women's political participation. Political violence against women and persons of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity is often aimed at silencing them and preventing them from entering and staying in politics and leadership roles. It can take many forms, from misogynistic comments to hate speech, sexual harassment and even attacks and murders. Increasingly, digital spaces are used for such violence. In 2023, cases of violence against women election candidates were reported in different parts of the world, including several Asia-Pacific countries.[32] Addressing this issue requires a broad range of measures, including putting in place or strengthening existing legislation to encourage and enable reporting of violence and hold perpetrators to account. It also requires institutional reforms to make the codes of conduct of parliaments and political parties more responsive to gendered concerns, enhanced public and workplace awareness of zero tolerance for gender-based violence, and the active involvement of men.[33] There is also the need to build peer-to-peer support networks among women politicians. One such initiative is the Women's Leadership Network of Mongolia that has brought together over 2,000 members across political affiliation.[34]

5.2.2 Executive branch and local government

Globally, in May 2024, 28 countries had a woman Head of State[35] and/or Head of Government. Women were Heads of State in 15 countries and Heads of Government in 16 countries.[36] In the Asia-Pacific region, India has a woman Head of State, Bangladesh and Samoa each has a woman Head of Government, while the Marshall Islands has a woman as Head of State and Government.[37]

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26 The Solomon Islands have a candidate quota target of 10 per cent for women (UN-Women, "United Nations Gender Quota Portal," database, available at: https://genderquota.org/quota-analysis (accessed 21 August 2024)).

27 Parline database: Electoral Quota for women. https://data.ipu.org/compare?field=chamber%3A%3Afield_is_electoral_quota_women&structure=any__lower_chamber#map. (Accessed 22 March 2024).

28 UNDP (2023). Momentum is Here: Mongolia's Journey Towards Gender Equality in Decision-Making. Available at: https://www.undp.org/mongolia/stories/momentum-here-mongolias-journey-towards-gender-equality-decision-making (accessed on 22 March 2024).

29 Carnegie, "India's New Gender Quota Law Is a Win for Women—Mostly. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace", web page. Available at https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/09/26/india-s-new-gender-quota-law-iswin-for-women-mostly-pub-90644 (accessed on 16 August 2024).

30 Electoral systems with proportional representation seek to create a representative body that reflects the overall distribution of public support for each political party. Majority or plurality systems, on the other hand, provide the representation of a whole constituency to a single candidate. See Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Proportional representation", web page. Available at https://www.britannica.com/topic/proportional-representation (accessed on 2 August 2024).

31 IPU, "Women in parliament 2023" (Geneva, 2024). Available at: https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2024-03/women-in-parliament-2023.

32 Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024). Women in parliament 2023. https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2024-03/women-in-parliament-2023.

33 Inter-Parliamentary Union (2022). Violence against women parliamentarians: Causes, effects, solutions. https://www.ipu.org/news/news-in-brief/2022-11/violence-against-women-parliamentarians-causes-effects-solutions-0.

34 UNDP, "Redefining Leadership: Beyond Gender Stereotypes" (2024), blog, available at: https://www.undp.org/mongolia/stories/redefining-leadership-beyond-gender-stereotypes (accessed 23 August 2024).

35 Excluding countries with monarchy-based systems.

36 UN-Women "Facts and figures: Women's leadership and political participation." https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures#_edn3.

37 Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN-Women (2023). "Women in Politics 2023", infographic (Geneva and New York, 2023). Available at https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/infographics/2023-03/women-in-politics-2023 (accessed on 22 March 2024). Since 2023, Nepal and Singapore have a male Head of State and New Zealand a male Head of Government. As of January 2024, the Marshall Islands has a woman president, serving as both Head of State and Government.

BOX 5.2 **Affirmative measures to empower women in politics in Mongolia**

Women currently take up 18.1 per cent of seats in Mongolia's unicameral parliament, the State Great Hural.[1] According to UNDP's 2023 Gender Social Norms Index report, about 74 per cent of the population hold biases against women being political leaders.[2] Acknowledging the multifaceted challenges for women's participation in politics, the Government of Mongolia has recently undertaken a series of affirmative measures including legislative and policy reforms, networking and capacity building for women in politics and public awareness raising programmes.

A recent amendment to the Law on Parliament Elections in 2023 increased the quota for women among political party candidates from 20 per cent to 30 per cent in the 2024 parliamentary election and to 40 per cent for the following election in 2028. The amended Law on Political Parties institutionalizes state funding for political parties with women candidates and candidates with disabilities that exceed the required gender and disability quotas.[3] The amendment opened the door to special measures, such as zippered candidate lists that alternate between men and women on the lists and nomination fee waivers.[4] Moreover, a constitutional reform in 2023 enlarged the legislative branch from 76 to 126 parliamentary seats, 38 per cent of which will be chosen by proportional representation, increasing women's electoral chances.[5]

Commitment and institutional reforms by political parties are equally important. In April 2023, 10 Mongolian political parties signed a pledge to support the legal reform to increase the candidacy quota for women, and commit to a series of internal actions, including financial allocations, to ensure gender parity in candidate nominations and political appointments. These political parties pledged to ensure at least 40 per cent representation of women at all decision-making levels within the party and to include the representation of diverse groups, to improve gender-responsiveness of party policies, bylaws, regulations and initiatives. All parties committed to implementing policies and programmes to address gender-based discrimination and violence, as well as harmful stereotypes and attitudes.[6]

Support to women's participation and leadership in politics has further gained spotlight through high-level peer-to-peer exchange between Mongolia women politicians and their international peers,[7,8] advocacy and peer-to-peer support provided by the nationwide Women's Leadership Network (WLN), and community-based awareness-raising to change gender stereotypical norms, in addition to provide peer-to-peer support.[9]

1   IPU Parline Database. Available at: https://data.ipu.org/node/113/data-on-women?chamber_id=13468 (accessed on 22 March 2024).
2   UNDP (2023). Momentum is Here: Mongolia's Journey Towards Gender Equality in Decision-Making. Available at: https://www.undp.org/mongolia/stories/momentum-here-mongolias-journey-towards-gender-equality-decision-making (accessed on 22 March 2024).
3   UNDP (2023). Momentum is Here: Mongolia's Journey Towards Gender Equality in Decision-Making. Available at: https://www.undp.org/mongolia/stories/momentum-here-mongolias-journey-towards-gender-equality-decision-making (accessed on 22 March 2024).
4   UN Mongolia (2023). Annual results report 2023. https://minio.uninfo.org/uninfo-production-main/d3201a16-e4a3-433e-9269-bfe2e3b167d6_UN%20Mongolia%20Annual%20Results%20Report%202023%20Final%20to%20Upload.pdf.
5   Bolor Lkhaajav, "Mongolia's Constitutional Reform Enlarges Parliament, Advances a Mixed Electoral System." The Diplomat, 14 August 2023. Available at: https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/mongolias-constitutional-reform-enlarges-parliament-advances-a-mixed-electoral-system/ (accessed on 22 March 2024).
6   UNDP (2023). Mongolian Political Parties Join Pledge for Equal Representation in Decision-Making. Available at: https://www.undp.org/mongolia/press-releases/mongolian-political-parties-join-pledge-equal-representation-decision-making (accessed on 22 March 2024).
7   B. Battsetseg, "Women's leadership brings a positive impact on all spheres of life", Montsame, 27 June 2023. Available at https://www.montsame.mn/en/read/322105 (accessed on 22 March 2024).
8   Bolor Lkhaajav, Mongolia's Constitutional Reform Enlarges Parliament, Advances a Mixed Electoral System. The Diplomat, 2 June 2023. Available at: https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/mongolia-hosts-icapp-womens-wing-with-emphasis-on-gender-equality/ (accessed 22 March 2022).
9   UNDP (2023). Momentum is Here: Mongolia's Journey Towards Gender Equality in Decision-Making. Available at: https://www.undp.org/mongolia/stories/momentum-here-mongolias-journey-towards-gender-equality-decision-making (accessed on 22 March 2024).

FIGURE 5.4 **Percentage of women cabinet ministers, 2023**
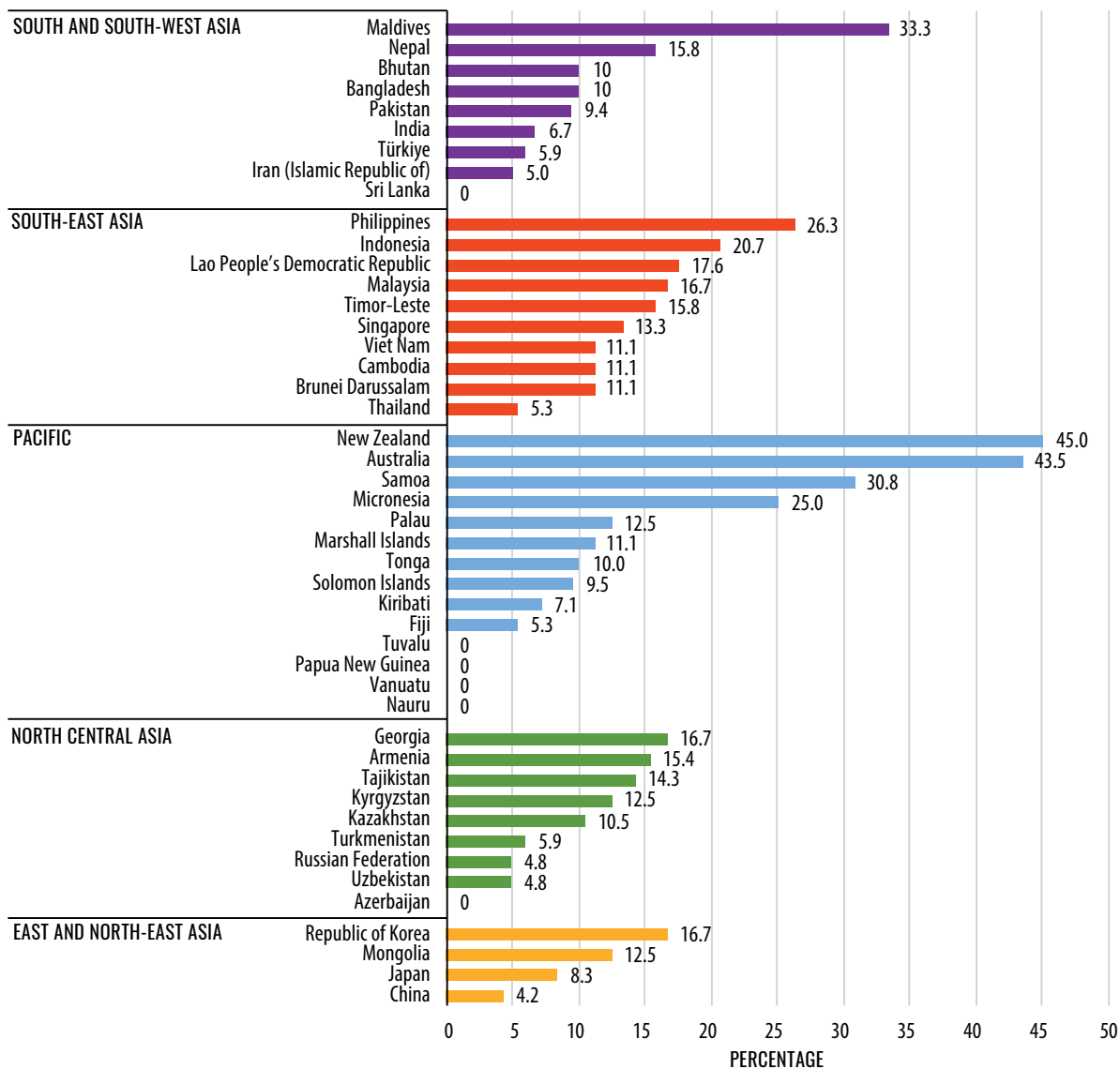
Source: ESCAP elaboration based on IPU and UN-Women (2023). Women in Politics 2023. The data source shows the share of women ministers as of 1 January 2023. In the case of the Maldives, as of November 2023, 3 out of 22 cabinet members were women (Maldives, President's Office, "The President submits 22 Cabinet Ministers' names to Parliament for approval," press release, 20 March 2023. Available at https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/29106; Maldives, President's Office, "The Cabinet" web page. https://presidency.gov.mv/Government/Cabinet/16 (accessed 21 August 2024).

Men remain dominant at the executive levels of government in Asia and the Pacific. Across the 46 countries in Asia and the Pacific with available data, the average proportion of ministerial positions occupied by women was 12.5 per cent in 2023, significantly lower than the global average of 22.8 per cent.[38] While there has been a marginal increase from 11.1 per cent in 2020, the pace of change remains slow and inadequate overall for the region.[39]

At the country level, in 2023 only five Asia-Pacific countries had more than 25 per cent of government ministers who were women (**Australia, Maldives, New Zealand, the Philippines and Samoa**). Among

these countries, Australia (43.5 per cent) and New Zealand (45 per cent) reported women holding more than 40 per cent of ministerial positions. Yet in nearly half of the countries with available data (22 out of 46 countries), women comprised 10 per cent or less of ministers. **Among these countries, six reported having no women minister in their executives** (Figure 5.4). Since 2020, the largest gains in the proportion of women-held ministerial positions were seen in Australia, Brunei Darussalam, New Zealand, the Philippines, Samoa and Viet Nam, where the proportion of women ministers increased by more than 10 percentage points. Declines of over 10 percentage points took place in five Asia-Pacific countries between 2020 and 2023 (Figure 5.5).

38 ESCAP elaboration based on Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN-Women (2023). "Women in Politics 2023", infographic (Geneva and New York, 2023). Available at https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/infographics/2023-03/women-in-politics-2023 (accessed on 22 March 2024).

39 ESCAP elaboration based on Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN-Women (2023). "Women in Politics 2023", infographic (Geneva and New York, 2023). Available at https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/infographics/2023-03/women-in-politics-2023 (accessed on 22 March 2024).

FIGURE 5.5   Change (percentage point difference) in the share of women ministers between 2020 and 2023

Philippines	17.7
Australia	16.8
New Zealand	15.0
Samoa	14.1
Viet Nam	11.1
Brunei Darussalam	11.1
Tajikistan	8.4
Armenia	8.3
Maldives	7.4
Kiribati	7.1
Lao People's Democratic Republic	6.5
Indonesia	6.4
Mongolia	5.8
Kazakhstan	5.5
Nepal	5.3
Thailand	5.3
Solomon Islands	4.5
Kyrgyzstan	3.0
Micronesia	2.8
Bangladesh	2.3
Turkmenistan	2.2
Tonga	1.7
Cambodia	1.7
Marshall Islands	1.1
Tuvalu	0
Vanuatu	0
Papua New Guinea	0
Bhutan	0
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	-1.5
Malaysia	-1.8
China	-2.3
Timor-Leste	-2.4
Pakistan	-2.6
Azerbaijan	-3
Uzbekistan	-3.2
Singapore	-3.4
India	-5.8
Türkiye	-5.9
Sri Lanka	-6.3
Japan	-7.5
Russian Federation	-8.1
Palau	-12.5
Nauru	-14.3
Republic of Korea	-16.6
Fiji	-17.8
Georgia	-28.8

Source: ESCAP elaboration (percentage point difference between 2020 and 2023) based on IPU and UN-Women (2023) Women in Politics 2023, and IPU and UN-Women (2020) Women in Politics 2020.

Recent analysis for the ASEAN countries has shown that, when women do hold ministerial positions, it tends to be the ministry leading the gender equality or women's empowerment portfolio and rarely other portfolios, such as finance or defence.[40] This is also the case at the global level, where women are overrepresented in leading ministries of gender equality and family and children affairs, but underrepresented in every other portfolio.[41]

Women's equal representation in local government is essential to ensure that the needs of all community members are taken into account in local-level policies. Such representation can serve as a gateway to national-level political participation.[42]

Women's participation is generally higher at the local level compared to the national level, although local deliberative bodies also remain dominated by men. **While parity at the local level has not been achieved in any of the 29 Asia-Pacific countries or territories with available data, women held over 40 per cent of elected local seats in India, Nepal and New Caledonia.** An additional five countries or territories (Azerbaijan, Fiji, Maldives, New Zealand and Northern Mariana Islands) reported representation of women above the 2023 global average of 35.5 per cent. In contrast, over half (21 out of 38) of Asia-Pacific countries and territories with available data reported women holding less than 25 per cent of seats in local deliberative bodies (Figure 5.6).

40   UN-Women and Women Count (2022). Women's Leadership in the ASEAN Region: Data Snapshot. Available at https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/ap-stats-01-221005_BLS22456-ASEAN-V03-s.pdf.

41   Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN-Women (2023). "Women in Politics 2023", infographic (Geneva and New York, 2023). Available at https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/infographics/2023-03/women-in-politics-2023 (accessed on 22 March 2024).

42   UN-Women (2021). Snapshot of Women's Leadership in Asia and the Pacific, web page. Available at https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/in-focus/csw/snapshot-of-womens-leadership-in-asia-and-the-pacific# (accessed on 16 August 2024); UN-Women and Women Count (2022). Women's Leadership in the ASEAN Region: Data Snapshot. Available at https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/ap-stats-01-221005_BLS22456-ASEAN-V03-s.pdf.

FIGURE 5.6   Proportion of elected seats held by women in deliberative bodies of local government (%), most recent year
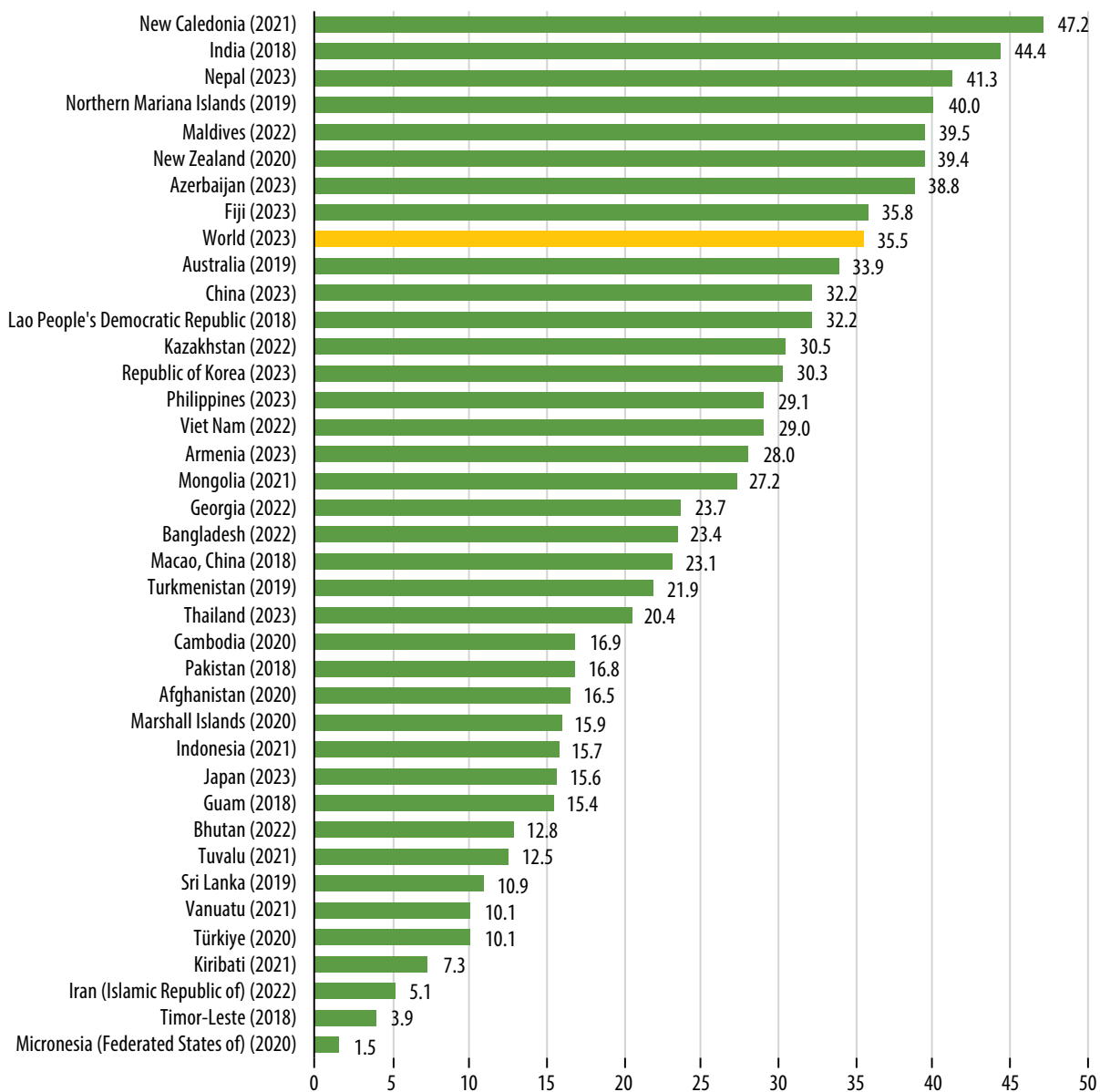
Source: ESCAP elaboration based on ESCAP SDG Gateway. "SDG Indicator 5.5.1: Proportion of elected seats held by women in deliberative bodies of local government (percentage)." Available at: https://dataexplorer.unescap.org (accessed on 29 May 2024).

5.2.3   Judiciary branch

Upholding justice and promoting equality is a primary function of judiciaries, which should ideally reflect the composition of the communities they serve. When judiciaries reflect the demographic composition of society, public confidence in judiciaries increases. This leads to more equitable outcomes by ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives and experiences that strengthen the knowledge base for decision-making.[43] Strengthening women's representation in judiciaries is instrumental to advance gender equality and

can contribute towards building public trust in justice institutions. While quotas around the world have improved the representation of women in legislatures, similar measures have to a large extent been overlooked in the justice sector. For the 23 ESCAP members and associate members with available data, on average women comprised 34.1 per cent[44] of all judges or magistrates. Large variations exist across countries and territories. The share of women judges and magistrates ranged from 64 per cent to 6 per cent among the ESCAP members and associate members with data available for 2021 (Figure 5.7).

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43   UNDP, *Gender and Judicial Excellence* (Bangkok, 2022). Available at: https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/judicial-integrity/publications/gender-and-judicial-excellence.

44   Figure based on the number of female and male judges/magistrates in the most recent year of data availability (aggregated for all 23 countries with available UNODC data). Available at: https://dataunodc.un.org/dp-cjs-personnel (accessed on 11 May 2024).

FIGURE 5.7   Share of women among judges and magistrates, latest year
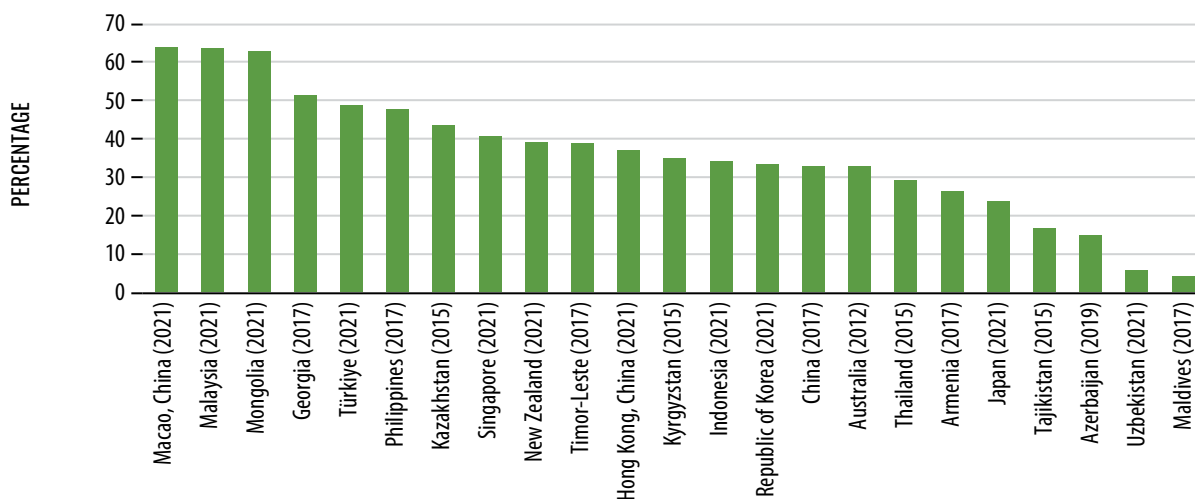
Source: ESCAP elaboration based on UNODC data (headcounts) on the numbers of women judges and total judges and magistrates. Available at: https://dataunodc.un.org/dp-cjs-personnel (accessed 11 May 2024).

Similarly, a diverse and inclusive judicial system is found to help judges understand the differences arising from disability, gender, sexual orientation, religion, race, ethnic background, and culture. This understanding enables them to better meet the justice needs of different groups. It also helps to inspire and maintain public confidence in the judiciary.[45] However, there is rarely any data to account for the representation of groups of diverse backgrounds in the judiciary in the Asia-Pacific region.

Women's representation in the justice sector is important for the quality of justice for women and other groups in vulnerable situations. Large segments of the world's population find themselves with inadequate access to justice, especially women, children and persons with disabilities.[46] Barriers to accessing justice can stem from an array of complex causes. These range from the exclusion of groups in vulnerable situations (such as stateless persons) from legal protection; outdated and overly complex justice systems; as well as barriers for justice seekers in relation to legal literacy, accessibility of justice services and limited resources (including time and financial resources).[47] Women can face unique social and institutional barriers to accessing justice, including biases in justice institutions, social stigma, and a lack of gender-sensitive procedures (see

more discussion in Chapter 6).[48] Women judges can play an important role in breaking down many of the barriers women face in accessing justice. For instance, women judges can establish trust and demonstrate sensitivity to gender-specific justice needs, such as when dealing with cases that involve sexual and gender-based violence.[49] The general underrepresentation of women in the justice sector means that gender perspectives are less likely to be considered in the application of the law and the administration of justice. This perpetuates biases and discriminatory practices in various forms against women, while undermining women's access to justice.[50]

While a broader range of systematic reforms are required to close the existing gaps in access to justice, addressing legal and social barriers to enable women to become justice professionals and excel in decision-making roles should be central to strategies aiming to ensure justice for all. A diversity lens is urgently needed in judiciary appointments to ensure inclusive representation. It is equally important to ensure an equal, supportive and non-discriminatory working environment for women judges, and to address sexual harassment, sexual misconduct and violent attacks against women judges within and outside the judiciary.

45   UNODC. "Strengthening Judicial Integrity through Inclusiveness and Diversity: A Canadian Perspective" (article). Available at: https://www.unodc.org/dohadeclaration/en/news/2021/12/strengthening-judicial-integrity-through-inclusiveness-and-diversity_-a-canadian-perspective.html.

46   Peter Chapman and others, "Grasping the Justice Gap: Opportunities and Challenges for People-Centered Justice Data". Washington, D.C.: World Justice Project; New York: Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies; Paris: OECD, 2021. Available at https://www.justice.sdg16. plus/, https://worldjusticeproject.org/, and https://www.oecd.org/.

47   UN-Women, "Justice on Life Support," web page, available at https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/focus-areas/governance/womens-access-to-justice/blogpost-series/blog-01-JUSTICE-ON-LIFE-SUPPORT (accessed 16 August 2024).

48   UN-Women, "Women's Access to Justice," web page, available at: https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/focus-areas/governance/womens-access-to-justice (accessed on 16 August 2024).

49   International Development Law Organization (IDLO), *Women Delivering Justice: Contributions, Barriers and Pathways* (Rome, 2018).

50   OHCHR (2021), A/76/142: Participation of women in the administration of justice - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, Diego García-Sayán. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a76142-participation-women-administration-justice-report-special; Interim report of the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers (2011). Available at : https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n11/449/71/pdf/n1144971.pdf?token=6Ejug6mMAjCrFC68sj&fe=true.

FIGURE 5.8 **Proportion of women in managerial positions, including senior and middle management, most recent year**
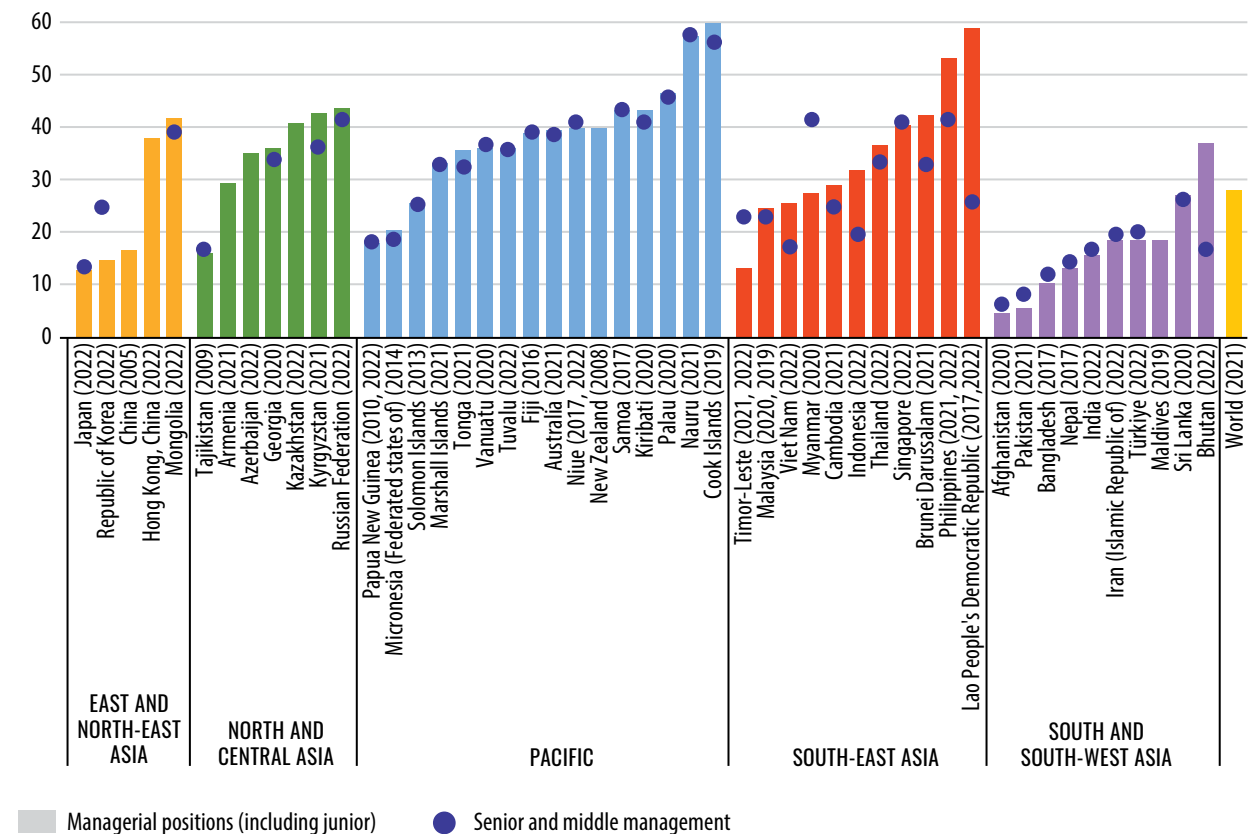
Source: ESCAP SDG Gateway. Indicators by SDG: 5.5.2 - Proportion of women in managerial positions. https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/. (Accessed 18 June 2024).

Note: When two different years are indicated on the horizontal axis in this figure, the first year refers to the year of observation for the share of women in managerial positions and the second to senior and middle management.

5.2.4 Women in managerial positions

Women's representation in managerial roles provides insight into women's power in decision-making in general, beyond the public sector. While data disaggregated by sector are not available, SDG indicator 5.5.2 monitors the proportion of managerial positions held by women in government, large enterprises and institutions.[51]

Across 49 ESCAP members and associate members with available data, only four (Cook Islands, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Nauru and the Philippines) reported that women held at least half of managerial positions. In 20 ESCAP members and associate members, the proportion of women was below the world average (28.2 per cent). Among the 41 members and associate members that had data on women's representation in senior and middle management positions, only four Pacific countries and territories were close to gender parity. Women

hold 57.7 per cent of senior and middle management positions in Nauru, 56 per cent in the Cook Islands, 45.5 per cent in Palau and 43 per cent in Samoa. In 17 members and associate members, women represented less than 25 per cent of senior and middle managers (Figure 5.8). Among the 30 members and associate members with at least two data points available since 2015, an increasing trend in the share of senior and middle management positions held by women was observed in 21 members and associate members.[52]

While the data available for SDG indicator 5.5.2 do not differentiate between public and private sectors, a 2020 ILO analysis of data from Group of 20 (G20) countries shows that the share of women in managerial positions tends to be lower in the private sector than in the public sector.[53] Data on business directors in the World Bank Entrepreneurship Database show that in 2022, the female-to-male ratio of business directors in the 11 Asia-Pacific countries

51 UNSD, SDG indicator metadata: 5.5.2: Proportion of women in managerial positions. Available at: https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/files/Metadata-05-05-02.pdf (accessed on 02 August 2024).
52 ESCAP Data Explorer. Indicators by SDG: 5.5.2 - Proportion of women in managerial positions. https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/ (accessed 18 June 2024).
53 ILO (2020). Women in managerial and leadership positions in the G20: Data availability and preliminary findings. Stock-taking report prepared for the EMPOWER alliance under the 2020 Saudi Arabian Presidency of the G20. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---ddg_p/documents/publication/wcms_762098.pdf.

FIGURE 5.9 **Gender gap in the number of business directors in Asia-Pacific countries**

(A) GENDER GAP IN THE NUMBER OF BUSINESS DIRECTORS BY COUNTRY IN 2022
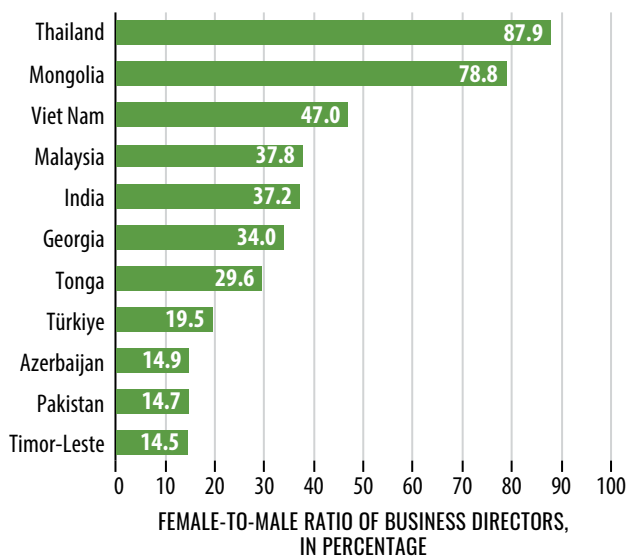
(B) CHANGE IN GENDER GAP IN BUSINESS DIRECTORS BY COUNTRY, 2014 AND 2022

FEMALE-TO-MALE RATIO OF BUSINESS DIRECTORS, IN PERCENTAGE

COMPARISION OF FEMALE-TO-MALE RATIO OF BUSINESS DIRECTORS BETWEEN 2014 AND 2022

Year 2022   Year 2014
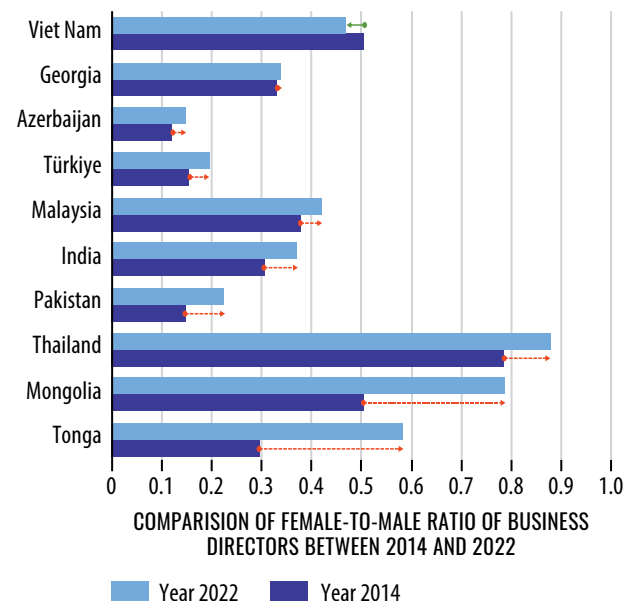
Source: ESCAP elaboration based on sex disaggregated data on business directors from World Bank Entrepreneurship Database, available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/entrepreneurship/gender/business-directors (accessed on 25 July 2024). Comparison between 2014 and 2022 are only available for ten countries.

with data ranged from a low of 14.5 per cent to a high of 87.9 per cent. Gender gaps have nevertheless narrowed in the majority of these countries between 2014 and 2022 (Figure 5.9). The Gender Balance Index 2024 generated by the Official Monetary and Financial Institutions Forum (OMFIF) that covers 335 financial institutions worldwide found that while the number of women governors of central banks increased to 29 (16 per cent) from 23 (15 per cent) in 2023, the share of female CEOs in commercial banks fell to 12 per cent from 16 per cent in 2023.[54] In the context of large companies, only four countries (**India, Nepal, Pakistan** and **Republic of Korea**) in the Asia-Pacific region legally prescribe a gender quota for corporate boards.[55] There is significant room and a range of opportunities for the private sector to foster gender parity in managerial positions by cultivating a gender-equal and inclusive business culture that embraces and proactively pursues a gender-balanced representation in management, including senior leadership and boards of directors. In addition, gender-responsive policies and compliance are needed to ensure equal opportunities for women and men in all their diversity, equal pay for equal work, as well as equal sharing of parental leave. There is also a need for companies in the region to ensure gender

diversity in their operations from top to bottom, offer and encourage uptake of flexible working arrangements, challenge conscious and unconscious biases in recruitment processes, and ensure that women have access to capacity-development and networking opportunities.[56]

Much progress is still required before the region can achieve gender parity in decision-making in the public and private sectors. Disaggregated data and statistics are extremely scarce to track the status of the representation of women and girls from diverse backgrounds, impeding the implementation of an intersectional approach to boost equal and inclusive representation of women. It is important to recognize the important role of affirmative measures to help overcome the systematic and intersectional disadvantages women face in politics and to put women at the table of decision-making. Legislative advocacy is needed to support and reinforce implementation of temporary special measures. But temporary special measures must have benchmarks and targets, with a roadmap of transitioning to systematically institutionalized gender parity and inclusive representation.

54 Official Monetary and Financial Institutions Forum (2024). Gender Balance Index 2024: Missed opportunities. Available at: https://www.omfif.org/gbi2024/.

55 World Bank, "Women, Business and the Law 2.0 Data for 2024: Legal frameworks". Available at: https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl-data (accessed on 27 March 2024).

56 Lola Woetzel and others, "The power of parity: Advancing women's equality in Asia Pacific", report, McKinzey Global Institute (New York, 2018). Available at: https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/gender%20equality/the%20power%20of%20parity%20advancing%20womens%20equality%20in%20asia%20pacific/mgi-the-power-of-parity-advancing-womens-equality-in-asia-pacific-full-report.pdf.

BOX 5.3   Increasing women's representation in corporate leadership in Malaysia

Malaysia's stock exchange, Bursa Malaysia, led the 2023 ranking of gender balance in corporate boards among 17 Asian stock exchanges conducted by the United Nations Sustainable Stock Exchange (SSE) initiative. In June 2023, 30.6 per cent of the board seats of the top 100 publicly listed companies in Malaysia were held by women.[1] In comparison, women held 16.6 per cent of board seats in 2016.[2] This development is the result of deliberate actions undertaken by the Government of Malaysia to increase women's representation in corporate leadership.

Recognizing the benefits of strengthening women's representation in corporate leadership, the Malaysian Cabinet approved a policy in 2011 which set the target that 30 per cent of decision-making positions among publicly listed companies should be held by women. To implement the policy, the Government of Malaysia established the Women Directors Registry, a platform listing qualified, experienced and aspiring women directors, making it easier for companies to identify women candidates for their boards.[3] The Prime Minister launched the Malaysian Chapter of the 30 per cent Club in 2015, a campaign calling for women to comprise at least 30 per cent of board members of companies listed in Bursa Malaysia. Non-listed companies were encouraged to work towards this goal.[4] This target was later more broadly promoted, as the Securities Commission in 2021 revised the Code on Corporate Governance and recommended all listed companies to meet this threshold.[5]

Furthermore, in the 2022 revision of the Malaysian Code for Institutional Investors, the Institutional Investors' Council of Malaysia clearly laid out the expectation that for companies to receive investments, women must represent at least 30 per cent of their board members by 2025. Despite these efforts, according to the United Nations SSE 2023 report, four among the top 100 publicly listed companies in Malaysia still had all-male boards. Therefore, in 2023, Bursa Malaysia put forward a new requirement for all publicly listed companies to have at least one-woman board member.[6]

1   New Straits Times, "Women hold 30.6% of board seats in top 100 PLCs, says 30% Club Malaysia", news article, 13 July 2023. Available at: https://www.nst.com.my/business/2023/07/930560/women-hold-306pct-board-seats-top-100-plcs-says-30-club-malaysia (accessed on 05 August 2024).
2   Securities Commission of Malaysia. (n.d.). "Positive progress made on gender diversity", press release, 21 January 2018. Available at: https://www.sc.com.my/resources/media/media-release/positive-progress-made-on-gender-diversity (accessed on 05 August 2024).
3   Malysia Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. (n.d.), "Women Directors Programme", report (Kuala Lumpur, 2012). Available at: https://www.kpwkm.gov.my/kpwkm/uploads/files/Dokumen/Dasar/Women-Directors-Programme.pdf.
4   30% Club, "Malaysia chapter", web page. Available at https://30percentclub.org/chapters/malaysia/ (accessed on 16 August 2024).
5   Bursa Malaysia, "SC updates the Malaysian Code on Corporate Governance to promote board leadership and oversight of sustainability", web page. Available at https://bursasustain.bursamalaysia.com/droplet-details/corporate-governance/sc-updates-the-malaysian-code-on-corporate-governance-to-promote-board-leadership-and-oversight-of-sustainability (accessed on 16 August 2024).
6   Bursa Malaysia, "Bursa Malaysia applauds progressive PLCs for embracing board gender diversity and censures PLCs with all-male boards", web page. Available at https://www.bursamalaysia.com/bm/about_bursa/media_centre/bursa-malaysia-applauds-progressive-plcs-for-embracing-board-gender-diversity-and-censures-plcs-with-all-male-boards (accessed on 16 August 2021).

5.3   GENDER-RESPONSIVE GOVERNANCE

Good governance is conditioned on transparency, participatory processes, responsiveness to the needs of the people, accountability and the rule of law. Gender-responsive governance can enable governments at all levels to be more responsive and accountable and enhances the quality of public services that benefit not only women and girls but the society as a whole. It contributes to transforming gender social norms if intentional investment is made to promote non-discriminatory laws and equitable, gender-responsive public policies and services, such as parental leave policies which promote the sharing of unpaid care responsibilities between parents.

Institutions such as national women's machineries and national human rights institutions ensure that gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls remain a high priority on a country's political and development agenda. They support the translation of commitments made in treaties and global or regional frameworks into national and subnational legislation, policies and practices. They help make women and girls' participation integral to decision-making at all levels. Women's civil society organizations (CSOs) and their participation in governance processes is also key. Gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) makes governments more accountable and ensures laws and policies are implemented to deliver outcomes for women and girls of diverse backgrounds.

5.3.1 National women's machineries

National women's machineries, or national machineries for gender equality, typically serve as the central coordinating unit for gender equality and the empowerment of women within national governments. They are mandated to promote the integration of gender equality measures across national legal frameworks, policies and programmes, coordinate national implementation of actions to achieve international commitments on women's human rights and gender equality, including the BPfA and the CEDAW, facilitate gender-responsive budgeting, and coordinate gender mainstreaming and capacity building within the government.

Among Asia-Pacific countries, the mandates of national women's machineries exist could be defined as broad as ensuring gender equality for all (Georgia, Japan and Palau) or more specifically about promoting the well-being and rights of women and girls (China, Marshal Islands and Pakistan). In some countries, the same national machineries are responsible for affairs related to families, women and children at the same time (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Republic of Korea).

There is a common misperception that a national women's machinery is equivalent to the "ministry for women's affairs" or a statutory "commission on the status of women," as opposed to a central policy coordinating unit. Such misperceptions overlook the fact that gender equality and the empowerment of women represent a cross-sectoral matter and result in inadequate investments to comprehensively address gender-related issues. The central role of national women's machineries is to advocate for consistent legislative actions across sectors and policy responses as part of a whole-of government and whole-of-society approach towards gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Across Asia and the Pacific, national women's machineries are diverse. Their location in government systems varies, as does their effectiveness. In 24 countries (60 per cent of survey respondents), such as Australia, Cambodia, India, Kazakhstan, Tonga and Türkiye, the machinery is led at ministerial level and its head has a seat at the cabinet table. In five countries (the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mongolia, the Philippines, Singapore and Tuvalu), the national machinery is led by the head of the executive branch of the government or someone who reports directly to this head. In other cases, the national machinery is housed within a sectoral ministry (Brunei Darussalam, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Palau, Russian Federation and Timor-Leste) and its head is below ministerial level. In these cases, it can take the forms of advisory or consultative commissions, committees or working groups; ombudsman and advocates' offices; interdepartmental bodies or taskforces; and

> **BOX 5.4 National women's machineries in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action**
>
> *A national machinery for the advancement of women is the central policy coordinating unit inside government. Its main task is to support government-wide mainstreaming of a gender-equality perspective in all policy areas. The necessary conditions for an effective functioning of such national machineries include:*
>
> **A** *Location at the highest possible level in the Government, falling under the responsibility of a Cabinet minister;*
>
> **B** *Institutional mechanisms or processes that facilitate, as appropriate, decentralized planning, implementation and monitoring with a view to involving non-governmental organizations and community organizations from the grassroots upwards;*
>
> **C** *Sufficient resources in terms of budget and professional capacity;*
>
> **D** *Opportunity to influence development of all government policies.*
>
> Source: Beijing Platform for Action, Paragraph 201. Available at: https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf (accessed on 05 May 2024).

decentralized mechanisms within the executive branch at provincial or local level (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and the Federated States of Micronesia).

The location of national machineries in government and the level of their leadership determines their political influence and decision-making power. Where the head of a national women's machinery is appointed at the highest level or directly reports to the head of the government, the machinery can promote gender equality by influencing the political agenda and policy making. However, in many countries, national women's machineries remain marginalized within government systems. Moreover, national women's machineries are often inadequately financed and understaffed. Among countries that responded to the survey, 18 countries (45 per cent) reported not having adequate financial resources or staff to fulfil the national women's machinery's mandate. In 17 (43 per cent) of the responding countries, the budget of the national women's machinery increased over the past five years, whereas 15 countries (38 per cent) reported the budget had remained stable. In 7 countries (18 per cent), the budget of the national women's machinery had declined.

Where national women's machineries exist, they usually do not sufficiently represent the perspectives of all women and girls, particularly those from the most vulnerable groups. For instance, the involvement of persons with disabilities in national women's machineries remains minimal. According to government responses to a recent ESCAP survey[57] on the final review of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2013–2022, 10 participating countries and territories reported that they had members in their national women's machineries who represented the cause of women and girls with disabilities; and seven of them claimed that disability inclusion was one of the aims of their national machineries. However, only four countries and territories reported having members with disabilities, and they represented less than 5 per cent of the membership of their respective national machineries, except for Fiji. Similarly, women with disabilities are also underrepresented in national machineries on disability matters. Among 23 countries and territories which reported on their national machineries on disability for the same ESCAP survey,[58] only 12 reported having women with disabilities in their memberships, representing 1.7 per cent to 27.3 per cent of their members. While men with disabilities were also underrepresented, they generally held more seats than women with disabilities in machineries on disability matters in these countries and territories. The underrepresentation of groups in vulnerable situations — women with disabilities, women migrants and indigenous women and girls — in national women's machineries impacts the machineries' agenda-setting and capacity to account for the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination against diverse groups of women and girls.

The existence of a national women's machinery should not replace the shared responsibility across all government ministries and agencies for achieving gender equality. While legal frameworks and national policies increasingly recognize the importance of addressing gender inequalities, the implementation of these commitments often falls short. It is essential to ensure that these commitments are well translated into sectoral policies and interventions across different levels of the government, with concrete objectives, benchmarks and targets, as well as adequate resource allocation. To achieve this, gender mainstreaming across the government and governance processes is crucial.

In a number of Asia-Pacific countries such as **Cambodia**, **China**, **Japan** and **Mongolia**, inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms have been set up to facilitate gender mainstreaming and monitor the implementation of policies and programmes related to gender equality and women across line ministries and across departments in the subnational governments. In **Indonesia**, gender focal points are designated at the national and subnational level in the executive, legislative and/or judicial branches of the government to facilitate gender mainstreaming across all development sectors. Where gender equality and the empowerment of women are highlighted in national agenda settings, governments often have conducted or even institutionalized gender budgeting and gender audits, as well as regular consultations with women's CSOs, which play an instrumental role in mainstreaming gender perspectives in policies and programmes across sectors, as exemplified by **Australia** and **New Zealand**. National women's machineries and the other aforementioned mechanisms play critical coordinating and/or technical assistance roles in these processes.

In addition, **national human rights institutions** are another important type of institutional mechanism for the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment. They are independent, state-mandated bodies responsible for promoting and protecting all types of human rights at the national level, and act as a bridge between the government and civil society.[59] At least 25 out of 40 countries that responded to the Beijing+30 global survey indicated that their national human rights institutions had specific mandates to address violations of women's rights and promote gender equality and gender mainstreaming in national legislation and policies. In **Indonesia**, the successful collaboration between the National Commission on Violence against Women and the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection resulted in the Sexual Violence Crime Bill (RUU TPKS) enacted by the Indonesian Parliament in 2022.[60]

57   ESCAP, Make the Right Real: Indicators database. Incheon Strategy Goal 2: Promote participation in political processes and in decision making. Indicator 2.3: Representation in national machinery for gender equality and women's empowerment. Available at: https://www.maketherightreal.net/data/goal-2 (accessed on 28 February 2024).

58   ESCAP, Make the Right Real: Indicators database. Incheon Strategy Goal 2: Promote participation in political processes and in decision making. Indicator 2.2: Representation in national coordination mechanisms on disability. Available at: https://www.maketherightreal.net/data/goal-2 (accessed on 28 February 2024).

59   European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI), "About National Human Rights Institutions", web page. Available at https://ennhri.org/about-nhris/#:~:text=National%20Human%20Rights%20Institutions%20(NHRIs,economic%2C%20social%20and%20cultural%20rights (accessed on 16 August 2024).

60   UN-Women, "The United Nations in Indonesia welcomes the Indonesian Parliament's approval of the Sexual Violence Crime Bill (RUU TPKS) into law on 12 April 2022", press release, 12 April 2022. Available at: https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/stories/press-release/2022/04/the-indonesian-parliaments-approval-of-the-sexual-violence-crime-bill (accessed on 23 September 2024).

5.3.2 Civil society engagement for gender equality and the empowerment of women

Civil society actors, including women's civil society organizations (CSOs) and women human rights defenders, have always played an important role in the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment. Over the decades, movements for women's rights have brought about significant societal change towards gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Civil society actors played a critical role in making the BPfA the most comprehensive agenda to date on gender equality and women's empowerment.[61] The inclusive and participatory practices of the Commission on the Status of Women and the implementation of the BPfA have provided a concrete basis for women's CSOs to mobilize and advocate for gender equality and women's empowerment.[62] The major contributions made by civil society to the advocacy and implementation of the commitments made in the BPfA were acknowledged in the Asia-Pacific Declaration on Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Beijing+25 Review.[63] Civil society actors have been particularly active and instrumental in actions to raise public awareness, deliver services and ensure that women's rights and gender equality perspectives are represented in debates and dialogues around all critical areas of concern, as well as emerging issues such as climate change and digitalization. For example, in the context of climate change, the CEDAW Committee has acknowledged the important role of CSOs in advocating for women's inclusion in climate resilience and adaptation strategies and has emphasized the necessity of involving civil society actors in creating gender-responsive policies and practices to address the disproportionate impacts of climate change on women.[64]

Enabling civil society to play its part in advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls requires an open and inclusive civic space. Governments play a fundamental role in shaping the policy and regulatory environments and institutional mechanisms that enable civil society actors to actively participate and contribute to the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment.[65] However, in Asia and the Pacific and across the world, CSOs have expressed concern that the civic space is shrinking, while they also face increasingly significant resource constraints. In addition, CSOs have noted a pushback against gender equality and women's empowerment, especially in areas such as sexual health and reproductive rights, and the women, peace and security agenda.[66] **Digitalization could be leveraged to provide a safe space for the expression and participation needed to inform such agendas. Yet this requires mechanisms to protect privacy and confidentiality and prevent gender-based violence in digital spaces.** Barriers to participation faced by groups in vulnerable situations must be dismantled. In some countries such as China and the Republic of Korea, digital platforms are used to collect public opinions on draft legislations and policy proposals, including to develop laws to combat gender-based violence.[67]

Young people are standing at the forefront of pushing for transformative change across economic, social, and environmental issues. Nonetheless, **youth-led organizations need additional support and resources to drive forward gender-transformative actions**.[68] To expand the reach and impact, social movements, especially those led by youth, have increasingly taken advantage of digital spaces and platforms to advance gender equality and women's empowerment. For example, noticeable efforts have been made to conduct online advocacy and awareness-raising activities on topics including gender-based violence and harassment, environmental protection, and sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights across the region.[69] In **India**, women and youth parliamentarians are encouraged to actively engage in decision making, policy discussions and other business of the parliament. Youth volunteers have also been engaged in large-scale community outreach programmes in districts vulnerable to gender-based violence and other human rights violations.[70] In the **Philippines**, women and youth-focused CSOs, as well as adolescents and youth, have been active in developing age-appropriate content and programmes that address sexual and reproductive health and rights, family planning,

61 UN-Women, "Five big wins ushered in by the landmark Beijing Platform for Action", web page. Available at https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/3/compilation-five-wins-ushered-in-by-beijing-platform-for-action (accessed on 16 August 2024).

62 CSOs participating in the Beijing+25 Review, *Asia-Pacific Civil Society Declaration on Beijing +25* (Bangkok, 2019). Available at: https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/B25-AP-CSO-Declaration.pdf (accessed on 16 July 2024).

63 ESCAP and UN-Women, *Asia-Pacific Declaration on Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Beijing+25 Review* (United Nations publication, 2020).

64 Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, General recommendation No.37 on gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in a changing climate, CEDAW/C/GC/37 (New York, 2018).

65 OHCHR, "Protecting and promoting civic space", United Nations guidance note (Geneva, 2020). https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/CivicSpace/UN_Guidance_Note.pdf.

66 CSOs participating in the Beijing+25 Review, *Asia-Pacific Civil Society Declaration on Beijing +25* (Bangkok, 2019). Available at: https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/B25-AP-CSO-Declaration.pdf (accessed on 16 July 2024).

67 National reports of the Beijing+30 review submitted by China and the Republic of Korea. Available at https://www.asiapacificgender.org/node/244.

68 United Nations, *Our Common Agenda: Policy Brief 3: Meaningful youth engagement in policymaking and decision-making processes* (New York, 2023). Available at https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4009368?v=pdf (accessed on 07 July 2024).

69 Oxfam, "Power at our fingertips: feminists in Asia stake their claim to digital space", blog, 16 March 2023. Available at: https://views-voices.oxfam.org.uk/2023/03/feminists-asia-digital-space/ (accessed on 07 July 2024).

70 India, Ministry of Women and Child Development, *National report of the Beijing+30 review* (2024).

maternal health, HIV/AIDs, and gender-based violence. The National Youth Commission has been a member on the Inter-agency Committee on Gender, Children, and Youth Statistics since 2013.[71]

The success of national women's machineries depends largely on civil society support, especially from women's civil society actors in their various forms, such as networks of women in political leadership and decision-making positions, women voters, women's professional associations (e.g., in the media sector) and other women's groups. It is often through these civil society actors and their advocates that diverse groups of women and girls can articulate their concerns and interests and become heard and seen by policymakers and the general public. Close partnerships and consultations between national women's machineries and these civil society actors are essential to ensure national strategies, policies and programmes are initiated, designed, financed and implemented to address the real and current concerns of diverse groups of women and girls.

Where CSOs representing different groups of women and girls are included in the decision-making body of a national women's machinery, they are more likely to have a voice and influence gender-responsive and inclusive policymaking. There exist various examples of productive collaborations between national women's machineries and women's CSOs and groups in the Asia-Pacific region. For instance, in **Malaysia**, the partnership between the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and the Asia Foundation on the care agenda contributed to the development of the national Care Industry Action Plan (to be released in 2024).[72] In the **Philippines**, the Philippine Commission on Women and local governments collaborated with Oxfam Philippines and academia to conduct the National Household Care Survey, providing additional evidence on the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work between men and women. This collaboration contributed to placing the need to address care-related issues on the policy agenda.[73]

5.3.3 Public financing for gender equality and women's empowerment

Public budget decisions and the underpinning public finance management systems have gender-differentiated implications on the socioeconomic outcomes of the population. **It is thus imperative to integrate gender considerations into all stages of the budget cycle**. These must shape the process from the planning and design of policies aimed at promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, to the allocation and tracking of resources to facilitate policy implementation, and the monitoring and evaluation of policy efficiency and effectiveness.[74] Gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) emerges as a strategic political and technical exercise to support a fair distribution of resources, foster a sense of justice and strengthen government accountability.[75]

Data from 105 countries and territories in the period between 2018 and 2021 show that only 26 per cent of the reporting governments had comprehensive systems to track gender equality allocations in the budget, as measured by three criteria assessing the main characteristics of a fiscal system. These criteria cover policy framework and adequate resources for gender equality; gender analysis in public finance management system; and transparent gender budget data. Some 62 per cent of countries in Central Asia and Southern Asia fully met the requirements of having a comprehensive system to track budget allocations for gender equality, followed by 33 per cent in Eastern Asia and South-Eastern Asia, and 20 per cent in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand).[76]

Regarding **policy framework and adequacy of resources for gender equality** (criterion 1), 92 per cent of the 105 reporting governments had policies and/or programmes in place to advance gender equality, but only 53 per cent indicated sufficient resource allocation for gender-responsive policies and 75 per cent reported budget execution mechanisms. Governments cited insufficient gender impact assessments to inform budget decisions, fiscal deficits, and gaps in systems to track resources from budget allocation to expenditure as critical barriers to adequate budget allocation.

Gender analysis has yet to be fully integrated into public finance management systems in most countries (criterion 2). While 57 per cent of governments used sex-disaggregated data to inform budget decisions and 54 per cent issued gender-responsive budget instructions, fewer governments conducted ex-ante gender impact assessment of proposed policies (42 per cent) and ex-post assessment (39 per cent), produced a gender budget statement (38 per cent), tagged or classified gender spending (26 per cent),

71 Philippines, Commission on Women, *National report of the Beijing+30 review* (2024).

72 The Asia Foundation, "The Asia Foundation named as key contributor to Malaysia's care industry action Plan", press release, 23 May 2024. Available at: https://asiafoundation.org/2024/05/23/the-asia-foundation-named-as-key-contributor-to-malaysias-care-industry-action-plan/ (accessed on 07 July 2024).

73 ESCAP, "Valuing Unpaid Care and Domestic Work. Country Case Study: Philippines", report (Bangkok, 2022). Available at: https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/22030-SDD-Unpaid-Care-Domestic-Work-Philippines-v1-3.pdf (accessed on 07 July 2024).

74 Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability Program, *Global Report on Public Financial Management* (Washington, D.C., 2022).

75 UN-Women, "What is gender-responsive budgeting", web page. Available at https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/explainer/2023/11/what-is-gender-responsive-budgeting (accessed on 11 April 2024).

76 UN-Women, "Strengthening public finance management systems for gender equality and women's empowerment: Promising practices and remaining gaps", technical brief (New York, 2023). See Annex 2 for country groupings according to the UN SDG definition.

and audited the budget to assess gender impacts (23 per cent). International organizations and countries have developed various tools for gender analysis. Yet, adapting and applying these tools to enable gender-responsive budgetary exercises remains a common challenge. Budget and audit institutions need to be engaged to help ensure gender budget allocations are spent in a responsible and accountable manner. In the **Philippines**, for example, the Commission on Audit is required to conduct audit observations on government agencies, including the implementation of the gender and development budget policy.[77] In **Georgia**, the parliament has introduced gender impact assessments as part of the lawmaking cycle and is seeking to gradually expand the legal reform to make gender impact assessment mandatory for all laws, as well as for all policies produced by the legislative and executive branches of government.[78]

When it comes to **transparency** for accountability (criterion 3), 63 per cent of governments made gender budget allocation information publicly available, and 59 per cent ensured the accessibility and timeliness of such information.[79] Gender-responsive budgeting can contribute to keeping citizens informed about efforts made by national and subnational governments to support gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Without transparent gender budget allocation information, the effect on public engagement is minimized.

Adequate financing is a prerequisite for the implementation of gender-responsive laws and policies across sectors. The limited progress in developing comprehensive systems to track and make gender equality allocations significantly impedes the mobilization of domestic public resources, which continue to be the primary source of financing for public goods and services and for inequality reduction through redistribution.[80] Substantial enhancements are needed to integrate gender analysis and gender-responsive budgeting into public finance management systems. The global debt crises pose a threat to public financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, as countries undertake austerity measures and divert resources way from gender-focused programmes. It has become increasingly urgent to explore and combine diversified financing means to sustain and advance the gender equality agenda (see more discussion in Chapter 8).

BOX 5.5 **Gender-responsive budgeting in India and the Philippines**

The adoption of gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) in Asia-Pacific countries, such as India and the Philippines, demonstrates their strong commitment to ensuring the efficient allocation of resources based on the identified needs of women and girls. These countries acknowledge the importance of integrating a gender perspective into the public financial management system in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

In 2005–2006, the Ministry of Finance in India introduced and institutionalized GRB. Since then, a Gender Budget Statement has been presented by the Indian Government during each year's budget session in parliament.[1] In addition to this, the Ministry of Women and Child Development adopted the mission statement "Budgeting for Gender Equity" and developed a strategic framework. The framework includes several key components, such as the establishment of Gender Budget Cells across ministries and departments, the provision of GRB training for both government and non-government stakeholders, and above all the production of an annual Gender Budget Statement. The formulation of the Gender Budget Statement involves multiple actors, including the Ministry of Women and Child Development, the Ministry of Finance, the Planning Department at the national level and the Planning Commissions at the state level.[2] As a key element of India's annual Union Budget, the gender budget consists of two parts: Part A encompasses schemes that allocate funds exclusively for women, while Part B – representing the dominant share in the

1   Vajiram & Ravi – Institute for IAS Examination (2023). Gender Budgeting in India, web page. Available at https://vajiramandravi.com/upsc-daily-current-affairs/mains-articles/gender-budgeting-in-india/ (accessed on 16 August 2024).

2   ESCAP, "Gender-Responsive Budgeting in Asia and the Pacific: Key Concepts and Good Practices", technical paper (Bangkok, 2017). Available at: https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/SDD_Gender-Responsive_Budgeting.pdf.

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77   Commission on Audit – Gender and Development, the Philippines, website. Available at: https://web.coa.gov.ph/gad/index.php/about-us/ (accessed on 8 August 2024).

78   Georgia, *National report of the Beijing+30 review* (2024). Available at https://www.asiapacificgender.org/node/244.

79   UN-Women, "Strengthening public finance management systems for gender equality and women's empowerment: Promising practices and remaining gaps", technical brief (New York, 2023).

80   United Nations, "Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective, Report of the Secretary-General", E/CN.6/2024/3 (New York, 2024).

BOX 5.5   Gender-responsive budgeting in India and the Philippines
(continued)

budget – comprises schemes that allocate a minimum of 30 per cent of funds towards women.[3] In the fiscal year 2024–25, forty-three ministries and departments[4] participated in GRB, with the gender budget rising from 5 per cent of the total annual budget in the previous fiscal year (2023–24) to 6.5 per cent, due to increased allocations from seven ministries and departments.[5, 6]

In 1995, the Philippine Commission for Women developed a Gender and Development budget policy that provides guidelines for integrating a gender perspective into the budgeting process. The policy requires all national government agencies and local government units to allocate at least 5 per cent of their budgets to gender-responsive programmes and activities.[7] To support the implementation of GRB, the Philippine Commission for Women also provides technical support and capacity-building assistance to agencies through training, workshops, advisory services and written guidelines. In addition to the Commission, several oversight agencies are responsible for ensuring the implementation of the Gender and Development budget policy, including 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. A unique aspect of GRB in the Philippines is the inclusion of gender audits as part of the regular audit processes, accompanied by strict measures to address non-compliance with the policy.[8] The Commission on Human Rights, which acts as the Gender Ombud, has issued official guidelines to identify violations or non-compliance and the corresponding penalties, such as disallowing spending from the allocated budget.[9] The Philippines has also taken steps to promote GRB at the sub-national level, including through the provision of technical assistance in conducting gender analysis of the socioeconomic situations of local government units and integrating sex-disaggregated data into local planning and budgeting.[10]

Despite the important steps taken by India and the Philippines to ensure that budget allocations align with the commitment to gender equality, both countries face challenges. India, for instance, struggles with the limited effectiveness of its GRB due to the exclusion of key programmes that benefit women and the lack of sex-disaggregated data.[11] Therefore, it is advisable that the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the Ministry of Finance continue to make concerted efforts to address gaps in the design and use of the Gender Budget Statement; establish stronger monitoring mechanisms to enhance the quality of GRB efforts at the sectoral level; integrate GRB considerations during the budget prioritization phase; and encourage subnational governments to adopt GRB practices, with the ultimate goal of ensuring the participation of the most vulnerable groups of women in planning and budgeting processes.[12] The Philippines faces obstacles in GRB implementation, such as uneven capacities among Gender and Development focal points, inadequate tracking of expenditures and underutilization of the Gender and Development budget by key agencies and local leaders.[13] A way forward should be to continue developing the capacities of focal points and government officials, as well as cultivating champions and potential successors.[14]

3   Kasliwal, R. (2023). The Status of Gender Budgeting in India. Centre for Policy Research. https://accountabilityindia.in/blog/gender-budgeting-in-india/.

4   On a total of 58 Union ministries and 93 departments of the central Government.

5   Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation, Department of Rural Development.

6   Press Information Bureau Delhi, "Gender Budget increases by 38.6% in FY 2024-25", press release, 2 February 2024. Available at https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2001975 (accessed on 20 August 2024).

7   Philippines, Commission on Women, "Gender and Development Budget," Web Page. Available at: https://pcw.gov.ph/gad-budget-report/ (accessed 21 August 2024).

8   ESCAP, "Gender-Responsive Budgeting in Asia and the Pacific: Key Concepts and Good Practices", technical paper (Bangkok, 2017). Available at : https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/SDD_Gender-Responsive_Budgeting.pdf.

9   UN-Women, *Gender-Responsive Budgeting in the Asia-Pacific Region: A Status Report* (Bangkok, 2016).

10   ESCAP, "Gender-Responsive Budgeting in Asia and the Pacific: Key Concepts and Good Practices", technical paper (Bangkok, 2017). Available at : https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/SDD_Gender-Responsive_Budgeting.pdf.

11   Kasliwal, R. (2023). The Status of Gender Budgeting in India. Centre for Policy Research. https://accountabilityindia.in/blog/gender-budgeting-in-india/.

12   UN-Women, *Gender-Responsive Budgeting in the Asia-Pacific Region: A Status Report* (Bangkok, 2016).

13   ESCAP, "Gender-Responsive Budgeting in Asia and the Pacific: Key Concepts and Good Practices", technical paper (Bangkok, 2017). Available at : https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/SDD_Gender-Responsive_Budgeting.pdf.

14   Frede Moreno (2023), "Gender-responsive budgeting n the Philippines: Comparative review of best practices and challenges", paper. Available at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4506528 and UN-Women, *Gender-Responsive Budgeting in the Asia-Pacific Region: A Status Report* (Bangkok, 2016).
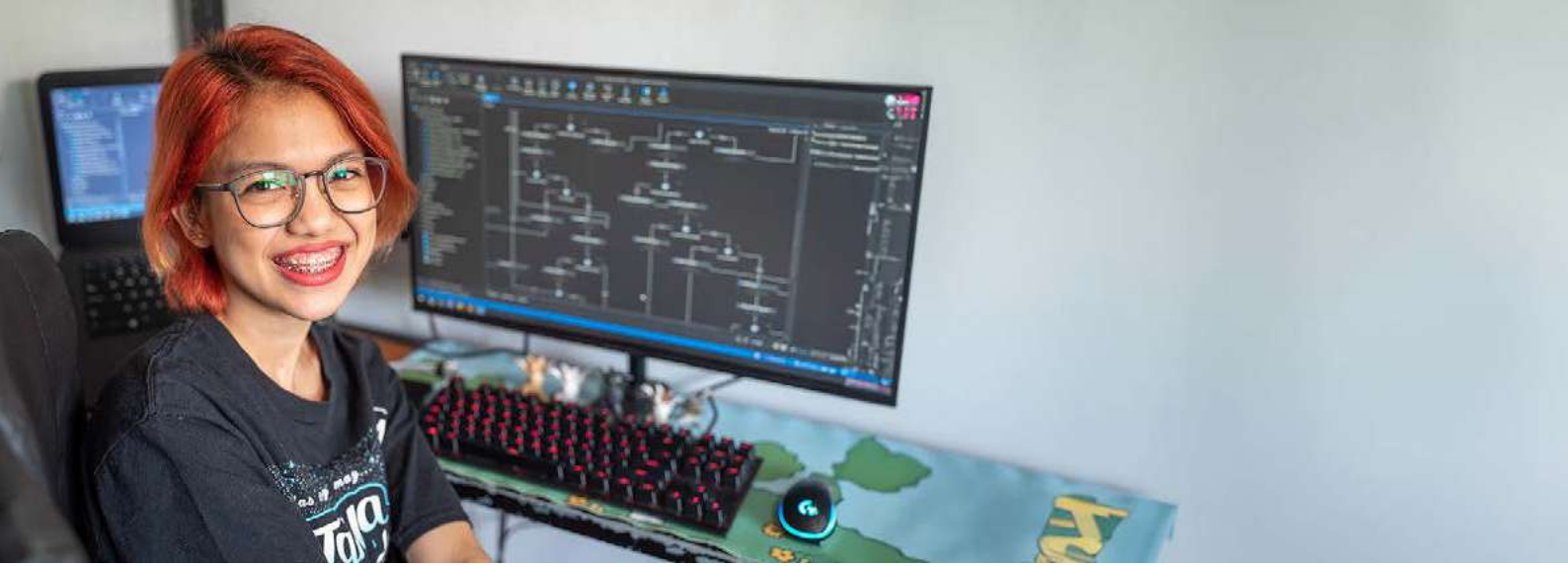
Woman in STEM: Honey Sta. Ana pursuing a career as a robotic process automation developer after receiving an ILO scholarship for women in web development. © ILO

5.4 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While notable progress has been made in women's participation in decision-making and leadership, the Asia-Pacific region is still far from reaching gender parity and equality across all levels and sectors. Overall, institutional mechanisms and instruments to enable gender-responsive governance remain weak. Incorporating diversity and inclusion lenses into gender-equal participation and gender-responsive governance is a particular challenge. The following actions are recommended for governments and civil society actors in the region:

➕ Expand affirmative legal measures and policies, including temporary special measures such as gender quotas, to increase women's representation in the legislative, executive and judicial branches of the government system. Such temporary special measures must have benchmarks and targets with a roadmap for transitioning to institutionalized mechanisms that enable gender party and inclusive representation.

➕ Create requirements, incentives and dedicated budgets for political parties, public institutions and private sector entities to pursue gender parity in election candidacy, management and leadership positions.

➕ Support capacity-building programmes and peer-to-peer networks to empower women leaders and professionals.

➕ Conduct long-term voter education and public education to address myths, misconceptions and stereotypes about women's leadership capacity and boost public awareness of and confidence in positive performance of women leaders.

➕ Put in place and implement policies and measures to address economic and social barriers to women's political and public participation, including but not limited to disproportionate unpaid care and domestic responsibilities, and gender-based violence against women in politics.

➕ Transform organizational cultures and practices in public and private institutions to be more gender-responsive and inclusive through a revision of internal policies and processes, and awareness-raising and training of personnel, especially those in management positions.

➕ Strengthen the ability of national women's machineries to represent and address the interest of women and girls, in particular groups in vulnerable situations, and guide gender mainstreaming throughout the government, equipping them with increased level of political influence, decision-making power, as well as budgetary and staffing support.

➕ Empower women's CSOs, especially those representing youth and vulnerable groups, to participate and influence decision-making processes, by providing an enabling policy and regulatory environment for civic participation, funding support, capacity development and institutionalized consultative mechanisms through national women's machineries and national human rights institutions.

➕ Prioritize the development of a comprehensive, transparent and accountable system to make and track public budget allocations for gender equality and women's empowerment, especially through the integration of gender analysis and gender-responsive budgeting requirements into public finance management systems.

➕ Collect, generate and publicize disaggregated data and statistics about gender-equal and inclusive representation and participation, as well as gender-responsive budgets, to drive reforms and foster public perspectives of meaningful participation and gender-responsive governance.

CHAPTER 6

Peaceful and just societies

A female officer checks the body temperature of a taxi driver in Bangkok, Thailand, showing the diversity of roles and responsibilities undertaken by women in law enforcement in the ASEAN region, as well as their engagement with the communities they serve. ©UN-Women and UNODC/Ploy Phutpheng

KEY MESSAGES

Peaceful and just societies cannot be achieved without addressing the dire situations of women and girls' human rights in conflict and emergency settings and empowering women and girls to exercise their agency and leadership.

A growing share of the population in Asia and the Pacific and globally are being affected by conflicts and other emergencies such as climate-induced weather hazards and disasters, many of them are women and girls who tend to suffer more acute poverty, food insecurity and elevated risks of violence in these fragile settings.

- Approximately 300 million people worldwide, including over 50 million in Asia and the Pacific, are expected to need humanitarian assistance in 2024 alone.[1]
- The number of people forcibly displaced or stateless is estimated to surpass 130 million by the end of 2024 and 12 per cent of them reside in Asia and the Pacific.[2]
- The number of women and girls living in conflict-affected countries exceeded 600 million globally in 2022, a 50 per cent rise since 2017.[3]

The women, peace and security (WPS) agenda, covering participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery, requires localization based on national and subnational contexts and stronger implementation. Deliberate consideration must be given to design and planning to fully respond to the needs of the diverse population groups affected, the challenges of intersectionality, and emerging peace and security risks. These risks include violent extremism and terrorism, climate-induced security risks and cybersecurity risks.

- As of May 2024, 16 Asia-Pacific countries adopted national action plans on WPS. Their implementation often encounters obstacles, such as insufficient political will, inadequate financial support and restricted engagement of civil society actors.
- Countries have increasingly considered intersectionality and emerging security risks in their WPS action plans. Human security must remain at the center of any intervention and over-securitization must be avoided.

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1   Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). *Global Humanitarian Overview 2024* (Geneva and New York, 2023).
2   United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). *Global Appeal 2024: UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency* (Geneva, 2024).
3   United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The gender snapshot 2023* (New York, 2023).

Women's effective participation in peacemaking, peacekeeping, peacebuilding and law enforcement efforts is essential to achieve peaceful and inclusive societies. However, women's role as peace agents and leaders continues to be underrecognized and inadequately supported.

✚ Women's participation is found to increase the likelihood of a peace agreement to last at least two years by 20 per cent, and by 35 per cent the likelihood of it to last 15 years.[4] Yet only 1 out of 18 peace agreements reached in 2022 globally was signed or witnessed by a representative of a women's group.[5]

✚ Only among personnel deployed from 15 Asia-Pacific countries do women account for at least 21 per cent of all military observers and staff officers deployed, in line with the 2024 target set by the United Nations Department of Peace Operations.[6]

✚ Women and girls' roles and contributions to building local peace infrastructure in the region are rarely documented, and their actions at the grassroots level are often undermined by limited funding.

✚ In 2019, women accounted for between 6 per cent and 20 per cent of police officers in ASEAN countries. Even smaller shares of female officers occupied managerial positions in law enforcement,[7] despite a positive trend of more and more female officers being in the pipeline for such positions.

In conflict-affected areas, sexual and gender-based violence is not only a by-product of fragility but a deliberate tactic for destabilization and repression.

✚ In 2022 alone, the United Nations verified nearly 2,500 reported cases of conflict-related sexual violence globally, with many more cases going unreported or remaining unverifiable.[8]

✚ Widespread attacks — from harassment, threats, disinformation, and hate speech to killings — against women, girls, women human rights defenders and civil society organizations working in the field of human rights have become an increasing concern in the Asia-Pacific region, especially in conflict-affected areas.

Access to justice for women and girls remains constrained by inadequate legal protection across all areas of law, as well as by economic, social and cultural barriers faced by women and girls. This challenge is compounded by the absence of gender-responsive institutions, infrastructure and procedures in the formal and informal justice systems.

✚ Legal gaps for the protection of women's rights are the largest in **South Asia,** and **East Asia and the Pacific**, only second to the Middle East and North Africa.[9]

✚ Only 9 per cent of the legal reforms undertaken by the world's economies between 2022 and 2023 to improve legal protection of women took place in East Asia and the Pacific, and none in South Asia.

✚ Justice systems in the region are generally underrepresented by women (see Chapter 5 for key data points) and continue to be affected by systematically internalized gender stereotypes and discrimination.

✚ Transitional justice mechanisms put in place in the region are found ineffective due to insufficient political will, lack of holistic investigation of human rights violation in all respects and limited participation of women and civil society groups.

Despite entrenched gaps and challenges, various countries in the region have made concrete efforts, in collaboration with international and regional organizations and civil society actors, to localize the WPS agenda; support women's meaningful participation and leadership in peace and security; build institutional, economic and social resilience to protect women and girls, especially those most vulnerable, from conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence; and make justice systems gender responsive and inclusive. A stock-take of these efforts must inform further actions.

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4   UN-Women. *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice and Securing the Peace: A global study on the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325. Fact sheet on key Messages, findings and recommendations.* (New York, 2015).

5   United Nations, "Women, Peace and Security, Report of the Secretary-General", S/2023/725 (New York, 2023).

6   United Nations Department of Peace Operations (UNDPO), "Operational effect and women peacekeepers: Addressing the gender imbalance", data, March 2024. Available at: https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/07_gender_statistics_72_march_2024.pdf (accessed on 05 April).

7   United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC), UN-WOMEN and Interpol, *Women in Law Enforcement in the ASEAN Region* (Bangkok, 2020).

8   United Nations, "Women, Peace and Security, Report of the Secretary-General", S/2023/725 (New York, 2023).

9   World Bank, *Women, Business and the Law 2024* (Washington, D.C., 2024).

6.1   OVERVIEW

Peaceful and just societies provide safety and security to all, especially women and girls as well as other groups who are often disproportionately affected by security threats due to their sexual orientation and gender identity, age, race, ethnicity, disability and indigenous identities. They provide the critical foundation for just, inclusive and sustainable development. The participation and leadership of women and girls is indispensable to building peaceful and just societies. However, this is not possible without strong institutional mechanisms to enable women and girls' agency and their leadership, address the widespread sexual and gender-based violence in conflict and emergency settings, and enhance the access to justice for all women and girls.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) calls for strategic actions with regard to women and armed conflict (critical area of concern E), violence against women (critical women area of concern D) and access to justice (critical area of concern I). Relevant actions recommended concern several other critical areas defined such as education and training, health, women's human rights and the girl child. The **United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (2000)** and nine other relevant resolutions provide a foundational framework for the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda. **General Recommendation No. 30 on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations (2013)** adopted by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women provides authoritative guidance to States Parties and non-State actors on the legislative, policy and other measures to ensure full compliance with State obligations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women with regard to projecting, respecting and fulfilling women's human rights in a broad thematic scope in situations of armed conflict and political crises.

The commitments made by Member States to the WPS agenda are further aligned with the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, particularly SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions). While these international treaties and instruments remain relevant, the world nowadays faces not only traditional peace and security threats such as armed conflict and communal violence, but also emerging peace and security risks associated with climate change, digitalization and new technologies. Furthermore, peace and security are increasingly challenged by intensified geopolitical tensions, pushbacks on gender equality and restricted civic spaces. These challenges underline the urgency of rethinking peace and security and upgrading solutions.

Chapter 6 reviews the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda, including its localization, women's meaningful participation in peace and security, conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, and access to justice in Asia and the Pacific, in the evolving peace and security contexts. The first section provides an overview of the localization and implementation of the WPS agenda in the changing contexts. The second section discusses the participation and leadership of women in peace processes and law enforcement. The third section focuses on addressing sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls in conflict-related settings. The last section discusses access to justice for women and girls.

6.2   THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA IN THE NEW CONTEXTS

Today, global peace and security is at a crisis level. **A growing share of the global population is living under overlapping and intersecting threats – both traditional and emerging threats – to peace and security.** In his policy brief on A New Agenda for Peace, the United Nations Secretary-General reflects on peace and security threats in the world today, including the changing conflict landscape; persistent violence outside of conflict environments; the potential weaponization of new technologies; rising inequalities within and between countries; shrinking civic space; and the climate emergency.[10] In 2024, nearly 300 million people around the world, including 50.8 million in Asia and the Pacific, are expected to be in need of humanitarian assistance.[11] Much of the increase in humanitarian crises has been driven by the widespread new and resurging armed conflicts across the globe, in combination with the ongoing global food and energy crises escalated by armed conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. These crises are exacerbated by the global climate emergency, infectious disease outbreaks and economic hardship.[12] Asia and the Pacific faces no fewer challenges, with frequent humanitarian crises due to disproportionate climate-induced emergencies, economic insecurity and instability. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the number of people forcibly displaced or stateless[13] will continue to grow and reach 130.8 million by the end of 2024, including an estimate of 15.6 million,

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10   United Nations, *Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 9: A new agenda for peace* (New York, 2023).

11   OCHA, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2024* (Geneva and New York, 2023).

12   Ibid.

13   These include refugees, internally displaced persons, asylum seekers, refugee and IDP returnees, stateless persons and others of concerns.

or 12 per cent, in Asia and the Pacific. Complex situations in Afghanistan and Myanmar continue to be the two major causes of forced displacement and statelessness in the region while the increase in climate-induced weather hazards and disasters contribute considerable numbers of internal displacements.[14]

6.2.1 Association between gender and peace and security

These negative trends undermine gender equality and the global peace agenda. Women and girls have been disproportionately affected by both traditional and emerging security threats. The number of women and girls living in conflict-affected countries[15] rose by 50 per cent since 2017 and reached 614 million in 2022.[16] They face acute poverty, high levels of food insecurity and an elevated risk of violence compared to those living in non-fragile settings. Progress made in women's rights and gender equality could experience rapid overturn by conflicts. In Afghanistan, since 2021, a patchwork of decrees codifying gender-based discrimination and inconsistently enforced policies and practices have sabotaged women's and girls' rights, in a return to the oppression of the 1990s.[17] Only one out of 18 peace agreements reached in 2022 globally was signed or witnessed by a representative of a women's group or organization. The share of inter-State and intra-State peace agreements reached between 2020 and 2022 that included provisions referring to women, girls and gender ranged from 21 to 33 per cent.[18] The United Nations Secretary-General points out that "the unconditional defense of women's rights" must be one of "the most visible and identifiable markers of the work of the United Nations on peace and security".[19] This call is particularly critical in the context of increasing backlash on gender equality and women's rights, including the rise of misogyny, and threats to multilateralism.

Gender equality remains one of the most significant predictors for peace and security. Research has found that the higher the prevalence of violence against women, the more likely a country may be to not comply with international norms and treaties and the less likely it is to operate peacefully in the international system.[20] The larger the gender gaps are for experiences and opportunities between women and men, the more likely a country is to be involved in inter- or intrastate conflict and to use violent responses.[21] The more gender-equal a state is, the more likely it is to be stable and peaceful and able to resolve conflicts without violence (Figure 6.1).[22] These findings suggest a pathway to peace and security through systematically enhancing gender equality, with a strong focus on measures to address gender-based violence and ensure women's participation in political, social and economic life.

Despite the disproportionate impact peace and security threats have on women and girls and their strong association with gender, **women and girls' role as active agents of peace and their contributions have not been fully recognized**. A growing body of evidence suggests that women's leadership roles in peace processes help shift the dynamics of community buy-in and result in peace agreements with more satisfactory and sustainable outcomes.[23] For instance, a UN-Women global study found that women's participation increases the likelihood of a peace agreement to last for at least two years by 20 per cent, and by 35 per cent the likelihood of it to last 15 years.[24] This is because women tend to pay attention to issues beyond ceasefire and military action, negotiating institutional reforms, social and economic recovery plans and transitional justice plans that contribute to the durability of peace processes.[25] However, despite increasing participation of women and women's groups in peace negotiations, actors involved in mediation and conflict resolutions remain resistant to including women. In 15 out of 16 peace dialogues examined by the aforementioned UN-Women global

14   UNHCR, *Global Appeal 2024* (Geneva, 2024).

15   These include: (a) countries featuring in relation to items of which the Security Council is currently seized, and which were considered by the Council at a formal meeting during the period from 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2022; (b) countries with peacekeeping or special political missions in 2022; and (c) countries that received programmatic funds from the Peacebuilding Fund in 2022.

16   UN-Women, *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2023* (New York, 2023).

17   UNHCR, "Situation of women and girls in Afghanistan - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls", A/HRC/53/21 (Geneva, 2023).

18   United Nations, "Women, Peace and Security, Report of the Secretary-General", S/2023/725 (New York, 2023).

19   United Nations, "Women, Peace and Security, Report of the Secretary-General", S/2020/946 (New York, 2020).

20   Valerie M. Hudson and others, *Sex and World Peace* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2014).

21   World Bank, "The Role of Gender in the Prevention of Violent Conflict," Background paper for the United Nations-World Bank Flagship Study, Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict (Washington, DC, 2017).

22   Ibid.

23   O'Reilly, M., A. Ó Súilleabháin, and T. Paffenholz, *Reimagining Peacemaking: Women's Roles in Peace Processes* (New York, International Peace Institute, 2015); Stone, L., "Study of 156 Peace Agreements, Controlling for Other Variables, Quantitative Analysis of Women's Participation in Peace Processes," in *Reimagining Peacemaking: Women's Roles in Peace Processes*, by M. O'Reilly, A. Ó Súilleabháin, and T. Paffenholz, annex I (New York, International Peace Institute, 2015); UN-Women, *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325* (New York, 2015); World Bank, "Preventing Violence through Inclusion: From Building Political Momentum to Sustaining Peace," Background paper for the United Nations–World Bank Flagship Study, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* (Washington, DC, 2017).

24   UN-Women, *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, and Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*, Fact Sheet on Key Messages, Findings, and Recommendations (New York, 2015).

25   Council on Foreign Relations, "Women's Participation in Peace Processes: Why It Matters", web page. Available at: https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/why-it-matters (accessed 16 July 2024).

FIGURE 6.1   The role of gender equality in state stability
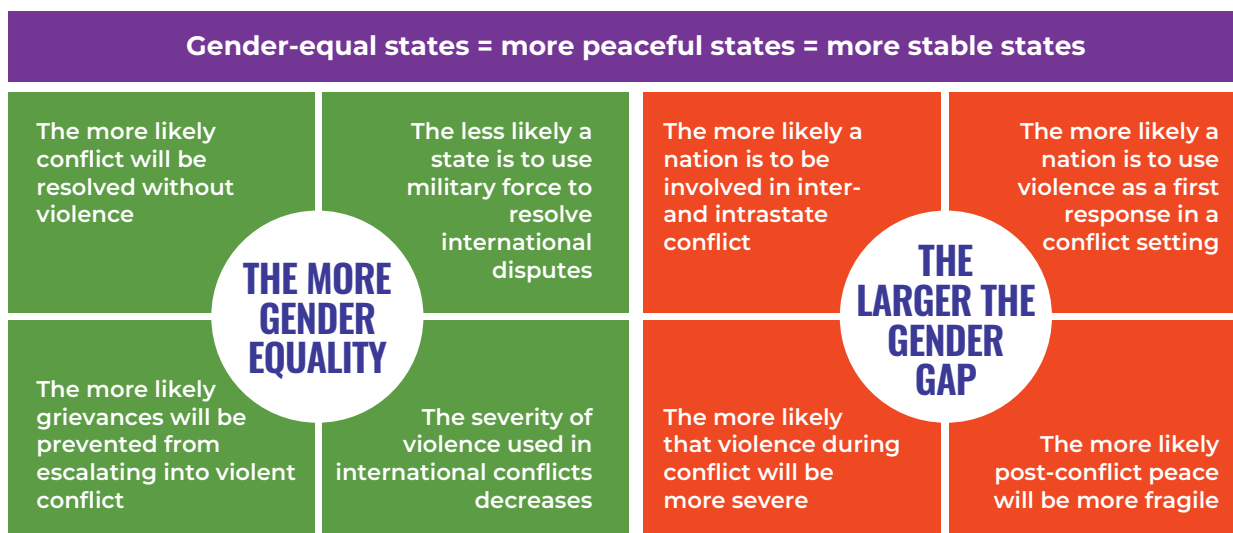
Source: Crespo Sancho, "The Role of Gender in the Prevention of Violent Conflict", background paper for the United Nations-World Bank Flagship Study, Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict, World Bank (Washington, DC, 2017).

study, decision-making was done by a small group of male leaders. Where women are able to participate, their official participation is often perfunctory. Giving women and women's groups observer status as a substitute for direct and effective participation is a good example of an all-too-common tokenistic approach. [26]

6.2.2   Localization of the Women, Peace and Security agenda in Asia and the Pacific

Women, Peace and Security (WPS) first made it on to the United Nations Security Council's agenda in 2000, with the adoption of the Security Council Resolution 1325. Resolution 1325 recognizes that women experience and are affected by conflict differently from men, and therefore, their participation and gender considerations have to be placed at the centre of all peacemaking, conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts. It outlines **the foundational framework for the WPS agenda consisting of four pillars: participation; protection; prevention; relief and recovery**. Since then, as of May 2024, a further nine resolutions have been adopted by the Security Council to promote gender equality and strengthen women's participation, protection and rights in the full conflict cycle, from conflict prevention to post-conflict reconstruction. Together, these ten

resolutions provide guidance to international, regional and national actions with regard to WPS. Increasingly, it is recognized that more priority should be given to women's full and meaningful participation in leadership and decision-making, acknowledging their contributions to peacemaking and peace building processes, rather than merely treating them as victims and survivors who need protection. The 2023 policy brief by the United Nations Secretary-General on a New Agenda for Peace [27] explicitly calls for Member States to transform gendered power dynamics in peace and security for a collective global security system.

Localization is crucial for operationalizing the women, peace and security agenda. At the national level, as of May 2024, 16 countries in Asia and the Pacific have adopted national action plans in relation to WPS. [28] Four of these national action plans have expired. In several countries such as **Armenia, Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal and the Philippines**, more than one generation of national action plans have been adopted. [29] The priorities and actions identified within these national and regional action plans in the WPS framework commonly integrate the four pillars of the WPS Agenda: participation, protection, prevention, relief and recovery. Some countries like **Thailand** choose to integrate WPS in their existing

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26   UN-Women, *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, and Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*, Fact Sheet on Key Messages, Findings, and Recommendations (New York, 2015).

27   United Nations, *Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 9: A new agenda for peace* (New York, 2023).

28   These 16 countries and territories include Afghanistan, Armenia (active), Australia (active), Bangladesh (active), Indonesia (active), Japan (active), Kazakhstan (active), Kyrgyzstan (active), Nepal (active), New Zealand, the Philippines (active), Republic of Korea, Sri Lanka (active), Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste (active) and Viet Nam (active). See WILPF, "1325 National Action Plans (NAPs): WILPF Monitoring and Analysis of National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security", web page, available at http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/ (accessed 23 August 2024); UN-Women, "The Second National Action Plan for the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and 1820 Resolution on Women, Peace and Security (FY 2022/2023-2024/2025)", (Bangkok, 2023), available at https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/11/the-second-national-action-plan-fy-2022-2023-2024-2025; UN-Women, "National Action Plans", web page, available at: https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/focus-areas/peace-and-security/national-action-plans (accessed on 23 August 2024); and UN-Women, "Women, Peace, and Security in Bangladesh: In Brief", (Dhaka, 2023). Available at: https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/bd-IN-BRIEF_WOMEN-PEACE-AND-SECURITY-s.pdf.

29   Several other countries, such as Thailand, are in the process of drafting their national action plans. See ASEAN Secretariat, "ASEAN Launches Guidelines for Member Countries to Adapt Women, Peace, and Security Policy", web page, available at: https://wps.asean.org/stories/asean-launches-guidelines-for-member-countries-to-adapt-women-peace-and-security-policy/ (accessed on 31 July 2024).

laws and policies, national development plans, or national security and defense strategies.[30] Both approaches for localizing the WPS agenda at the national or subnational level have their advantages and disadvantages. Integrating the WPS agenda into other relevant frameworks may be considered more feasible in some contexts in the light of cost and time considerations. Developing a designated action plan for WPS, though sometimes considered expansive and time-consuming, provides an opportunity to create a participatory and consultative process that engages more stakeholders involved in the WPS agenda.

At the subnational level, the **Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in the Philippines** launched the third generation of its subnational action plan (2023-2028) to promote the WPS agenda locally. This groundbreaking initiative has the aim of enhancing the meaningful participation and leadership of women in the Bangsamoro in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and governance. It contributes towards the broader peace and development agenda in the region. This subnational action plan has been updated to align with the Philippines's national action plan for WPS. Emerging threats and issues that are most relevant to the local contexts in Bangsamoro have been identified, such as cybersecurity, climate security and mental health and psychosocial support to women and girls in emergency settings. Starting from November 2023, the technical team led by the Bangsamoro Women Commission embarked on a series of actions to support the roll-out and further localization of the subnational action plan in all BARMM provinces.[31] **The Autonomous Region of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea** has adopted the Gender Equality, Women Empowerment and Peace and Security Policy for 2023-2027.[32] The policy plays an important role in gender equality and women's empowerment in Bougainville's post-conflict context. Before the latest edition released in 2024, there were two previous iterations of this policy, the first of which was adopted and endorsed in 2013 and the second in 2016.[33]

Solutions that involve cross-border collaboration have gained increasing importance as the landscape of conflicts and peace and security threats evolves. Conflicts and security threats could spill over borders. The humanitarian crisis which forced millions of Rohingya refugees into the Cox's Bazar region of Bangladesh is one such example. In 2017, armed attacks, mass violence and serious human rights violations forced thousands of Rohingya people to flee their homes in Myanmar's Rakhine State. The majority of them arrived in the Cox' Bazar region of Bangladesh. Today, nearly one million Rohingya refugees reside in Cox's Bazar,[34] making it the world's largest refugee camp. Despite immediate humanitarian assistance from the Government of Bangladesh and the local communities, the needs remain immense. Resolving this protracted crisis requires not only continued humanitarian support from Bangladesh and the international community but sustainable solutions in Myanmar that could enable Rohingya refugees to eventually and voluntarily return to Myanmar in a safe and dignified manner.[35]

Cross-border collaboration is crucial even for managing and preventing security risks from escalating. At the subregional level, **Pacific Island countries** adopted a Pacific Regional Action Plan (2012–2015).[36] The **Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)** has adopted in late 2022 a Regional Plan of Action.[37] Implementation of the Regional Plan of Action is overseen by the ASEAN Advisory Group on Women, Peace and Security.[38] A toolkit has been developed to guide the regional action plan's localization in ASEAN member countries.[39] The ASEAN Regional Plan of Action highlights actions to address emerging peace and security challenges in the ASEAN region, including climate change, cybersecurity, pandemics and extremism. Crucially, it highlights the need to strengthen cross-border legislative cooperation and coordination to support the implementation of WPS initiatives, and to develop institutional capacity for WPS through regional training programs, expertise sharing, and exchange of good practices.[40]

30 UN-Women, *Country Brief: Women, Peace and Security in Thailand* (Bangkok, 2023).

31 UNDP Philippines, "Bangsamoro Women unveil Renewed Regional Action Plan for Women, Peace, and Security", web page. Available at https://www.undp.org/philippines/press-releases/bangsamoro-women-unveil-renewed-regional-action-plan-women-peace-and-security (accessed on 31 July 2024).

32 Autonomous Region of Bougainville, "Gender Equality, Women Empowerment and Peace and Security Policy", web page. Available at https://abg.gov.pg/index.php?/news/read/ministerial-statement-by-abg-minister-for-community-development-hon-morris-opeti (accessed on 16 July 2024); UN-Women, "UN-Women's Operational Response at the Regional Level: Asia and the Pacific", Background Note: Briefing to the Executive Board, Annual Session 2024 (New York, 2024).

33 Autonomous Region of Bougainville, *Policy for Women's Empowerment, Gender Equality, Peace and Security* (Bougainville, 2016). Available at: https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/Bougainville-Gender-Equality-Peace-and-Security-policy-2016.pdf (accessed on 05 August 2024).

34 UNHCR Bangladesh, "Operational Update, March 2024" (Bangladesh, 2024).

35 IOM, "IOM Appeals for USD 138 Million to Support Rohingya Refugees and Local Communities in Cox's Bazar", blog, 30 March 2022. Available at: https://www.iom.int/news/iom-appeals-usd-128-million-support-rohingya-refugees-and-local-communities-coxs-bazar (Accessed 31 July 2024).

36 The action plan has expired, with no subsequent editions.

37 ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security* (Jakarta, 2022). Available at: https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/32-ASEAN-Regional-Plan-of-Action-on-Women-Peace-and-Security.pdf (accessed 31 July 2024).

38 ASEAN, "ASEAN Launches Guidelines for Member Countries to Adapt Women, Peace, and Security Policy," web page. Available at: https://wps.asean.org/stories/asean-launches-guidelines-for-member-countries-to-adapt-women-peace-and-security-policy/ (accessed 31 July 2024).

39 ASEAN Secretariat, *Localization Toolkit and Guidelines for the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security* (Jakarta, 2023).

40 ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security* (Jakarta, 2022). Available at: https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/32-ASEAN-Regional-Plan-of-Action-on-Women-Peace-and-Security.pdf (accessed 31 July 2024).

The design of NAPs on WPS requires increased focus on intersectionality especially in the face of evolving and emerging security threats. **WPS is not a niche agenda for women. It is an agenda for gender equality, social justice and peace.** The WPS agenda is predicated on the understanding that for peace and security policies and practices to be effective and sustainable, they need to identify and respond to the differentiated needs and experiences of women and men, including those from groups in vulnerable situations, and to enable their meaningful participation. Women and men with disabilities,[41] persons belonging to ethnic minorities and Indigenous Peoples, older persons, children and youth are often especially exposed to risks of violence, abuse, neglect and marginalization during conflicts and crises. They are equally often excluded from decision-making and actions at all stages of the conflict cycle. Increasingly, it is recognized that persons of sexual minorities and non-binary gender identities face distinct vulnerabilities during conflict, which should also be reflected in the WPS agenda.[42] Systems and structures set up to respond to emergencies often do not incorporate accessibility considerations and necessary adaptations that support these aforementioned groups, for whom seeking assistance could further exacerbate their vulnerability.[43]

Armenia, Australia, Bangladesh, Japan, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Timor-Leste have incorporated intersectional perspectives in their latest NAPs on WPS to account for the differentiated situations of diverse groups, ensuring their participation and representation in peacebuilding efforts and the protection of their rights. Accounts are given for age (Armenia, Japan and Sri Lanka), race (Australia, Armenia and Sri Lanka), ethnicity (Armenia, Australia, Bangladesh, Japan and Sri Lanka), religion (Australia, Bangladesh, Japan and Sri Lanka), socioeconomic status (Armenia, Japan and Sri Lanka), geographic location (Japan, Sri Lanka and Timor-Leste), disability (Armenia, Australia, Bangladesh, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Timor-Leste), indigenous status (the Philippines), and ex-combatant status (Nepal and the Philippines). **Armenia, Australia, Japan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Timor-Leste** have accounted for sexual orientation and gender identities in their respective national action plans (NAPs). In the **Philippines**' NAP 2023-2033, explicit recognition was given to persons of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, expression and sexual characteristics (SOGIESC), particularly for those directly and indirectly involved in the full process of conflict prevention and transformation, and peacebuilding.[44] Engaging individuals and communities from these groups, affected yet often marginalized, in the design of NAPs on WPS needs to be accorded more importance. Deliberate consultation mechanisms are required to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of the NAPs in responding to their distinct concerns and needs.

Countries in the region have paid increased attention to emerging security threats in the localized WPS agenda. Asia and the Pacific is a region with a highly complex range of security challenges related to armed conflict, communal conflicts, violent extremism and terrorism, transnational crimes, cyber insecurity, climate change, natural disasters, migration and displacement, as well as public health pandemics.[45] It has become increasingly essential for the WPS agenda to respond to emerging security issues such as violent extremism and terrorism, climate crisis, and cybersecurity. The impact of such issues on women's participation, security needs, rights and gender equality, is far reaching.

Addressing these often-overlapping security threats requires a strong gender and intersectional lens and consolidated actions. For instance, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) suggests that at least 40 per cent of all intrastate conflicts that occurred in the last six decades have a link to natural resources.[46] Increasingly, climate change and environmental degradation fuel local tensions and conflicts centring on access, use or control of critical natural resources, as they cause increased scarcity in natural resources. But environmental factors are rarely the sole cause of violent conflict. Peace in these environmentally vulnerable contexts cannot be achieved without addressing local power dynamics, including those related to gender, religious beliefs and ethnicity. Pervasive gender inequalities often expose women and girls disproportionately to economic, political and environmental shocks associated with

41   United Nations, "Protection of Persons with Disabilities in Armed Conflict, Report of the Secretary-General", S/RES/2475 (New York, 2019).

42   United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *A Global Handbook: Parliaments as Partners Supporting the Women, Peace and Security Agenda* (Oslo, 2019).

43   United Nations, "Women, Peace and Security, Report of the Secretary-General", S/2023/725 (New York, 2023).

44   Philippines, Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity, *National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2023-2033* (Manila, 2023).

45   ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security* (Jakarta, 2022). Available at: https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/32-ASEAN-Regional-Plan-of-Action-on-Women-Peace-and-Security.pdf (accessed 31 July 2024).

46   United Nations Peacekeeping, "Conflict and Natural Resources," web page. Available at: https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/conflict-and-natural-resources#:~:text=The%20United%20Nations%20Environment%20Programme%20%28UNEP%29%20suggests%20that,a%20conflict%20relapse%20in%20the%20first%20five%20years (accessed on 13 July 2024).

climate and environmental crisis and conflicts, due to their association with natural resources related roles in the community. Yet, they often remain marginalized in local governance mechanisms, peacebuilding and conflict prevention processes, and environment and climate adaptation actions. Consolidated actions to address the gender-climate-security nexus provide significant opportunities to empower women and girls politically and economically and their meaningful participation and contribution to peace. **Armenia, Australia and the Philippines** have directly addressed public health emergencies (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic) as well as climate change, and climate- and human-induced disasters. **Japan** and **Bangladesh** highlighted in their latest NAPs on WPS actions to address climate change as a threat and sexual and gender-based violence in disaster-affected areas and situations. Implementation of these NAPs needs to be monitored closely to understand their effectiveness in addressing the intersecting challenges of gender inequalities, climate crisis and conflicts.

Moreover, **Armenia, Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam** have considered and aim to respond to cybersecurity threats and online hate speech targeting women activists and politicians. There has been particular focus on misinformation and fake news spreading (Indonesia, Timor-Leste, and Sri Lanka); hate speech and harassment based on gender, ethno-religious identity and political affiliations (Japan, Indonesia and Sri Lanka); and gender-based cybercrimes, including girls and women trafficking and recruiting (Timor-Leste). **Australia, Bangladesh, Indonesia** and **the Philippines** have taken into account terrorism and violent extremism.[47] The **Maldives**' National Action Plan on Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism (2020-2024) emphasizes women's roles in radicalization and deradicalization processes. The National Counter Terrorism Center in the Maldives conducted capacity-building programs in 19 atolls to enhance community engagement and early intervention, delivery training on identifying social vulnerabilities.[48] **While incorporating these security risks into the WPS agenda is encouraging, the design and implementation of respective actions to address these security risks requires careful consideration. A balance is required to avoid over-securitization and to prioritize human security**[49] **and to ensure that individuals and communities remain at the heart of responses.**

6.2.3 Implementation challenges for the WPS agenda in Asia-Pacific countries

The implementation of the WPS agenda continues to face critical gaps in the actual political will and funding. Out of the twelve active national action plans developed by Asia-Pacific countries, only one (**Kazakhstan**) includes a partial cost plan which outlines the expected costs of certain activities and specifies that activities will either not require funding or will remain within the allocated funding limits. **Nepal and Timor-Leste** have foreseen in their respective action plans the preparation of detailed implementation plans and budget proposals. All twelve countries have identified in their respective national action plans potential financing resources to support implementation, typically originating from the State or regional budget, as well as funding from the international community. This includes funding from regional and international organizations, such as the United Nations agencies and the European Union. In some cases, funding is expected to be sourced from nongovernmental and civil society organizations, as well as the private sector. **Armenia, Australia, Bangladesh, Japan, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Timor-Leste** have outlined a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework in their NAPs on WPS. Accounting for these aspects can influence the political will which determines the financial support for implementation.

Even in countries where there is a designated financing mechanism for the implementation of WPS, the utilization of the budget is far from ideal. The **Philippines** has contributed some good practices in the implementation of the NAPs on WPS. Since 2009, the Government has supported the implementation of its NAPs at both national and local levels with 5 per cent of the budget dedicated to Gender and Development (GAD) mandated by the Philippines' Magna Carta of Women. Particularly successful programmes have increased access to improved education and health services in conflict-affected areas in Mindanao.[50] Despite these positive practices, the actual GAD budget for the implementation of the NAP on WPS was found to be underutilized. More efforts are needed to consistently localize the NAP on WPS into local GAD plans and budgets in other regions with less intensive conflict-related contexts than in Mindanao and across all branches of the government.[51]

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47 Based on ESCAP review of active national action plans on women, peace and security from Asia-Pacific countries as of May 2024.

48 Maldives, Ministry of Social and Family Development, *Comprehensive National-Level Review on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing +30 Review)* (Malé, 2024).

49 Gretchen Baldwin and Taylor Hynes, "The Securitization of Gender: A Primer", The Global Observatory, web page. Available at: https://theglobalobservatory. org/2022/10/the-securitization-of-gender-a-primer/ (accessed on 31 July 2024). Securitization refers to the process of political issues, identities, and other factors being framed as "security threats", thereby justifying the use of securitized or militarized approach and means to address those threats. The call to avoid over-securitization emphasizes the need to give more priority to development and resilience building, with women's rights and gender equality at the core of prevention and response.

50 ASEAN Secretariat, USAID and UN-Women, *ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security* (Jakarta, 2021).

51 Philippines, *National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2023-2033* (Manila, 2023).

BOX 6.1 **Emerging security issues in the Women, Peace and Security agenda**

Violent extremism and terrorism

Asia and the Pacific has long faced challenges related to violent extremism. Women can play various roles in relation to violent extremism and terrorism. They can be, sometimes simultaneously, the victims/survivors of sexual or gender-based violence and terrorist acts, and the perpetrators and active members of violent extremist groups. Gender stereotypes in responses to violent extremism and terrorism often frame women and girls as victims and men and boys (on the basis of gender and its intersection with other factors including ethnicity, age and region) as perpetrators, or at least as security threats. This is unjust and risks leading to increased harassment, discrimination and criminalization.[1]

It is nonetheless increasingly urgent to understand and address the violent misogyny, which the UN Secretary-General identified as the "troubling commonality" that runs through terrorist attacks, extremist ideologies and brutal crimes.[2] Fear and hatred of women or femininity and support for violence against women are found to be most strongly associated with violent extremism, whether among men or women.[3] Diverse sexual orientation and gender identity is also treated as a threat to others.[4] Some early warning signs for extremist violence include attacks on women's rights and women's human rights defenders, as well as persons of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity. For counterterrorism and violent extremism prevention strategies to be effective, they need to address not only causal factors such as poverty, socioeconomic grievances, extreme religiosity, social exclusion and oppression but also the overlaps between misogyny and conservative politics in religious fundamentalist and violent extremist groups. Increasingly, approaches to countering terrorism and violent extremism focus on prevention. They emphasize the empowerment of women to play active roles in prevention, response and building resilience.[5, 6] Community-based approaches with active engagement of women and girls, as well as men and boys, that prioritize human security and peace perspectives should be given increased importance to avoid over-securitization.[7]

Climate change

The effects of climate change, environmental degradation and natural resource scarcity are exacerbating insecurity and instability. Climate change affects security in a number of ways which include altered mobility and displacement patterns. Natural disasters force millions of people to flee home each year. In 2022 alone, 8.7 million people globally were internally displaced as a result of disasters. The numbers of recorded internal displacements hit a record high in South Asia and one third of countries in East Asia and the Pacific, mainly in Southeast Asia. Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Philippines are among the countries reporting the highest numbers of disaster-related internally displaced people in 2022.[8] Not all disaster displacement is climate-related, but as climate change induces more and more extreme weather events such as floods, storms, wildfires and droughts, even more people are at risk. The resilience of societies and their capacity to build and sustain peace is thus undermined.

The global evidence shows inextricable linkage between climate change and peace. Close to one billion people live in the countries most exposed to climate change and 40 per cent of them are affected by high levels of conflict and violence, which in turn correlates with low levels of women's inclusion, participation

1 Gretchen Baldwin and Taylor Hynes, "The Securitization of Gender: A Primer", The Global Observatory, web page. Available at: https://theglobalobservatory.org/2022/10/the-securitization-of-gender-a-primer/(accessed on 31 July 2024).

2 Antonio Guterres, "Address to the 74th session of the UN General Assembly", address, 24 September 2019. Available at https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2019-09-24/address-74th-general-assembly (accessed on 31 July 2024).

3 UN-Women and Monash University, "Misogyny & violent extremism: Implications for preventing violent extremism", policy brief (Melbourne, 2019).

4 Baldwin, Gretchen, and Taylor Hynes, "The Securitization of Gender: A Primer", article, The Global Observatory, 11 October 2022. Available at: https://theglobalobservatory.org/2022/10/the-securitization-of-gender-a-primer/ (accessed on 31 July 2024).

5 United Nations, "Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism," Report of the Secretary-General, A/70/674 (New York, 2015).

6 International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), *2023 Global Report on Internal Displacement* (Geneva, 2023).

7 Baldwin, Gretchen, and Taylor Hynes, "The Securitization of Gender: A Primer", article, The Global Observatory, 11 October 2022. Available at: https://theglobalobservatory.org/2022/10/the-securitization-of-gender-a-primer/ (accessed on 31 July 2024).

8 International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), *2023 Global Report on Internal Displacement* (Geneva, 2023).

BOX 6.1   Emerging security issues in the Women, Peace and Security agenda *(continued)*

and security.[9] Alongside climate-induced migration, natural resource scarcity and the climate-related pressure on land and water exacerbated by climate-induced and other disasters has become a major concern for the Asia-Pacific region. Natural resource scarcity and expanding competition over land and water create instability for people and communities and often impose heightened insecurity. This can have various dimensions, including food insecurity, loss of livelihood to gender-based violence and heightened social tension that could turn into conflicts. Women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities and other groups in vulnerable situations are disproportionately affected due to pre-existing inequalities. Study shows that a few Asia-Pacific countries are at high risk of issues related to gendered climate, peace and security.[10] It is however necessary to avoid the over-securitization of climate change and the consequential displacement and migration. Such an approach could risk all attention and funding being directed towards state security and migration restriction rather than human security and safety alongside climate adaptation and actions to address the root cause of climate change.[11]

Cybersecurity and AI-related security risks

While the COVID-19 pandemic has promoted digital connectivity and usage globally, it has also exposed increasing challenges of cybersecurity. Women and girls, ranging from ordinary users and online learners to women politicians and women human rights defenders, suffered a great increase in online harassment, threats, sexual exploitation and abuse during the pandemic. Online platforms have also been used to carry out cybercrime such as scamming, spread radical ideologies and recruit members of violent extremist groups. These issues do not exclusively affect women and girls. Yet women and girls, including women and girls of diverse sexual orientation and gender identities, women with disabilities and women and girls of certain religious backgrounds are particularly vulnerable. Weak regulation and the lack of women and diversity talents in the cybersecurity workforce in governments and the private sector mean this pernicious online environment is insufficiently challenged.

The WPS agenda is obliged to address cybersecurity and ensure a gender-inclusive cyberspace as part of the broader women, peace and security agenda. Across the Asia-Pacific region, the gendered cyber security context is diverse, with the Pacific and part of South Asia having a much lower degree of digitalization compared to East Asia and Southeast Asia. However, even countries with a lower degree of connectivity, face critical challenges related to cybersecurity. The cyber space has provided a broad spectrum of avenues for building peace and security, from raising awareness and transforming attitudes to using digital means to improve the efficiency of peacekeeping and peacebuilding actions, particularly for the engagement of civil society groups and of women, adolescents and groups at risk of marginalization in peace processes.[12] Yet the cyber space can only be leveraged to make positive changes for peace and security if countries address the gender digital divide and cybersecurity concerns particularly those that concern women and girls in all their diversity. Similarly, the increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) has a double-edged effect on women, peace and security. It could be used to support the implementation of the WPS agenda but it could also be used to facilitate military interventions and incite hate speech, spread radicalization and encourage violence and even recruit members of violent extremist groups.[13]

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9   Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Peace Index 2019: Measuring Peace in a Complex World* (Sydney, 2019), cited in United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, *Weathering Two Storms – Gender and Climate in Peace and Security* (New York, 2022).

10   UN Women, *Research Brief: Gender, Peace and Security in Natural Resource Management: Land, Forest, and Water Management in the Asia Pacific* (Bangkok, 2022).

11   Gretchen Baldwin and Taylor Hynes, "The Securitization of Gender: A Primer", article, The Global Observatory, 11 October 2022. Available at: https://theglobalobservatory.org/2022/10/the-securitization-of-gender-a-primer/ (accessed on 31 July 2024).

12   UN Women, *Project Brief: Women, Peace and Cybersecurity: Promoting Women's Peace and Security in the Digital World (2021-2023) for the Asia Pacific Region* (Bangkok, 2023).

13   UN Women, *Action Brief: From Warfare to Peacebuilding: Employing Artificial Intelligence for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda* (New York, 2023).

Thailand established the Coordinating Center for Children and Women in the Southern Border Provinces (CCWC-SBP), a Government-CSO joint coordinating mechanism on women and children's issues in the Southern Boarder Provinces in 2019, in partnership with UN-Women and UNICEF. This aims to coordinate the implementation of its Measures and Guidelines on Women and the Promotion of Peace and Security.[52] While the CCWC-SBP was supported by a budget of 10 million Thai Baht to implement its activities in 2019, this budget was mostly provided by the UN agencies. A longer-term capacity building and financing mechanism is required to sustain its implementation.

Implementation of the WPS agenda is often sidelined at times of crisis. Security risks intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. These risks ranged from the rise of gender-based violence coupled with interrupted survivor support services, to increased cyber-based and technology-facilitated harassment and abuse. Despite these challenges, securing political will and funding support to implement the WPS agenda became harder during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic recovery periods. Governments redirected resources to control the spread of the virus, maintain basic welfare and services, and restore livelihoods and the economy. Fragile political stability is another factor that can unravel the WPS agenda, as evident by the recent developments in **Afghanistan**. While the previous government adopted an NAP for WPS in 2015, the Taliban's takeover in 2021 has overturned every progress made in the past two decades towards strengthening women's rights and protection. This has been done through a systemic and institutionalized regime of decrees, policies and practices that entrench oppression and discrimination against women and girls.[53, 54] The funding outlook is likely to become even more dire as geopolitical fractions and wars affect an increasing number of countries and territories, including in Asia and the Pacific. In contrast to the limited and ambiguous financing for the implementation of WPS, the world military expenditure hit a record high of US$ 2.24 trillion in 2022, of which 25.7 per cent was spent by countries in Asia and the Pacific.[55] It is expected to continue to rise in 2024 due to the protracted war in Ukraine, the war in Gaza, and the rising geopolitical tensions in Asia.

While civil society can play a crucial role in upholding human rights and development, including in the WPS agenda, the shrinkage of the civic space, compounded by severe underfunding, poses profound challenges to implementation. Addressing the increasingly complex security risks and intersecting forms of discrimination often requires effective engagement of community-based responses. Civil society and community-based organizations have unique strength in capturing context-specific realities, mobilizing support and generating broad-based buy-in at different levels (international, national, local and grass roots), building local capacity for implementation and delivery of assistance especially in the prevention of conflict and violent extremism, contributing to fundraising campaigns, and assisting in monitoring and evaluation to help governments rethink national and local priorities from a gender perspective.[56] Yet, shrinking civic spaces, compounded by a backlash against gender equality and women's rights and restrictions on freedom of speech and expression both online and offline, continue to narrow the room for participation and engagement of civil society stakeholders, including women human rights defenders. As a result, channelling funding to local organizations and groups, including those led by women and by forcibly displaced people, to participate in peacebuilding, conflict prevention, climate actions and protection from gender-based violence has become challenging.[57] In both **Afghanistan and Myanmar**, women's organizations and women activists have been shut down or repressed since the power shifts in 2021.[58, 59]

All twelve countries with an active NAP on WPS have acknowledged the meaningful participation of civil societies organizations in WPS efforts in the design, implementation, and monitoring stages of the respective NAPs on WPS. Nevertheless, none of these NAPs have specified financial support to civil society organizations. Despite this, Australia and the Philippines have indicated non-financial support such as capacity building (**Australia and the Philippines**); and support for existing community mobilization efforts and women's rights organizations to take the lead in peace and security discussions (**Australia**).

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52   UN-Women, *Country Brief: Women, Peace and Security in Thailand* (Bangkok, 2023).

53   Farkhondeh Akbari and Jacqui True, "Women, peace and security in Afghanistan: How to support women and girls?", background paper prepared for Malala Fund's UN General Assembly engagements (Melbourne, 2022).

54   UN-Women, "Expert Group Meeting on International Strategies and Tools to Address the Situation of Women and Girls in Afghanistan, 26-27 July 2023, Istanbul, Türkiye", meeting report (Istanbul, 2023).

55   Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *Military Expenditure Database*. Available at: https://milex.sipri.org/sipri (accessed on 25 May 2024). The regional grouping of "Asia and Oceania" includes 44 countries and territories in Asia and the Pacific. The 2022 data excluded the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

56   ASEAN Secretariat, *Localisation Toolkit and Guidelines for the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security* (Jakarta, 2023).

57   UNHCR, *Global Appeal 2024* (Geneva and New York, 2024).

58   Farkhondeh Akbari and Jacqui True, "Women, peace and security in Afghanistan: How to support women and girls?", background paper prepared for Malala Fund's UN General Assembly engagements (Melbourne, 2022).

59   United Nations, "Letter dated 22 March 2022 from the Permanent Representatives of Ireland, Mexico, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General," S/2022/258 (New York, 2022).

Timor-Leste emphasized the protection of women human rights defenders and civil society organizations engaged in peace and security actions.[60]

Some countries have taken promising steps towards civil society engagement. For instance, the Government of the **Philippines** carried out comprehensive nation-wide consultation with civil society stakeholders in the performance assessment of their previous national action plan (2017-2022) on WPS.[61] To address the concerns about declining participation of CSOs in NAP implementation, the latest NAP 2023-2033 commits to a range of tailored actions. These range from continuous and scale-up capacity building for CSOs, to work on the full cycle of conflict to providing psychosocial services to CSO service providers.[62] **Indonesia** has engaged CSOs, including faith-based organizations, to review its previous NAP and contribute valuable inputs, particularly with regard to the prevention of violent extremism, to its latest NAP (2020-2025).[63]

In **Thailand**, out of 28 members of the Committee of the CCWC-SBP, a joint Government-CSO coordination mechanism working in the Southern Boarder Provinces, 18 are representatives from women's groups and CSOs working on women and children's issues. Women-led groups work with the National Human Rights Commission and local governments to implement various social safeguards, deliver services and facilitate interfaith dialogues between Buddhist and Muslim communities.[64] **Nepal** involved representatives of women conflict victims' groups and other CSOs in the drafting committee and the implementation committee for its second NAP on WPS (2022-2025). **Bangladesh** held dialogues between CSOs and government representatives to discuss potential initiatives to support the implementation of its NAP on WPS.[65] Additionally, a consultation platform was established to ensure CSO participation in monitoring, evaluation and reporting on the implementation of the NAP on WPS.[66]

There is a pressing need to explore more diverse funding sources, beyond the sole reliance on public-sector funding, and more efficient mechanisms to allocate, use and monitor funding. Resolving relevant challenges may require deliberate strategies to direct sufficient resources for gender equality in official development assistance to fragile states and economies, allocate targeted budgets in public and private climate financing schemes for addressing gender-climate-security issues, institute long-term financial support such as regular allocation for WPS actions in peace operation budgets, and increase predictable, accessible and flexible funding for women's CSOs working on peace and security at all levels.

6.3 WOMEN'S MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP IN EFFORTS FOR PEACE AND SECURITY

The right of women to meaningful participation is at the heart of the women, peace and security agenda. It is enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and international humanitarian and human rights law. In 2020, the United Nations Secretary-General articulated five goals on women, peace and security for the decade ahead. One of these goals was women's full, equal and meaningful participation in all efforts of peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding as a non-negotiable political priority.[67] Nevertheless, women continue to have limited opportunities to influence peace and security processes. Women face similar structural barriers to meaningful participation in addressing other emerging security issues such as disaster and climate-induced risks, which will be discussed in Chapter 7. The discussion in this section focuses on women's meaningful participation in peace and security processes including peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

Armenia, Australia, Bangladesh, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam have emphasized specific measures to increase women's representation in peace negotiation and peacekeeping forces in their NAPs on WPS. These measures include initiatives such as promoting inclusive peace negotiations and/or decision-making processes at international, national and/or local levels (Armenia, Australia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Japan, Nepal, the Philippines, and Tajikistan); increasing the number of women in military and police contingents for peacekeeping operations (Armenia, Bangladesh and Japan); providing leadership training for women in decision-making, as well as military and peacekeeping roles (Bangladesh, Kazakhstan, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam); advocating for quotas to ensure equal participation in decision-making roles, peace processes and mechanisms (the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam); implementing capacity building programmes to strengthen women's

60 Based on ESCAP review of respective national action plans.
61 ASEAN Secretariat, *Localisation Toolkit and Guidelines for the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security* (Jakarta, 2023).
62 Philippines, *National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2023-2033* (Manila, 2023).
63 Ibid.
64 ASEAN Secretariat, USAID and UN-Women, *ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security* (Jakarta, 2021).
65 UN-Women, *Women, Peace, and Security in Bangladesh: In Brief* (Dhaka, 2023).
66 Bangladesh, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security" (Dhaka, 2022).
67 United Nations, "Women and Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General", S/2023/725 (New York, 2023).

involvement in policymaking and peacebuilding efforts (Australia, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Tajikistan, and Viet Nam); studying the international best practices to enhance women's participation in the defense sector (Armenia).[68]

6.3.1 Peace making

Direct participation of women in peacemaking has been proven important for building inclusive and sustainable peace, yet few women have a seat at the table. The peace negotiations between the Filipino Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) were led by a woman, Miriam Coronel-Ferrer. She chaired the peace panel and, on behalf of the Filipino Government, signed the final peace agreement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in 2014, making her the first female chief negotiator in the world to sign a final peace accord. Additionally, women made up 40 per cent of the peace negotiators involved, 69 per cent of the secretariat, and 60 per cent of the legal team, and three out of the 12 signatories of the peace agreement were women. This unusually high representation of women in the peace process ensured considerations of gender and women's issues, which has led to the inclusion of gender provisions eight out of the 16 articles in the peace agreement signed in 2014.[69, 70]

Nonetheless, the success story in **the Philippines** has not been replicated in other parts of the region. There were no women in the US-Taliban negotiations between 2018 and 2020, nor any reference to women's rights or their political participation in the resulting Doha Agreement, which enabled the withdrawal of international forces from **Afghanistan** and the Taliban's return to power,[71] nor in the delegations for the negotiation or subsequent review of the five-point consensus of the ASEAN on **Myanmar** since 2021.[72] The five-point consensus signed between the ASEAN and the authorities of Myanmar had no mention of gender or women,[73] nor did any of the decisions which flowed out of the subsequent reviews between 2021 and 2023. To lead by example, the United Nations has made efforts to increase women's representation and leadership in special political missions and UN mediation support teams, resource dedicated gender and inclusion expertise. The UN has taken action to secure political and civil spaces for women's participation in international processes and mechanisms, even in challenging contexts like Afghanistan.

6.3.2 Peacekeeping

Promoting women, peace and security in United Nations peacekeeping operations requires improved participation of women. Security Council resolution 2538 adopted in 2020 encouraged Member States "to develop strategies and measures to increase the deployment of uniformed women to peacekeeping operations" by providing access to information and training and by "identifying and addressing barriers in the recruitment, deployment, and promotion of uniformed women peacekeepers". The UN Department of Peace Operations has set out yearly targets to increase women's representation among uniformed peacekeeping personnel by 2028.[74] Despite progress made since 2018, more needs to be done to increase women's representation in all categories of uniformed personnel, especially among troops. As March 2024, women accounted for 22.99 per cent of all United Nations military experts on mission and staff officers, exceeding the 21 per cent target for 2024. Among all 26 troop-contributing countries in Asia and the Pacific, 15 countries have met or exceeded the 21 per cent target for women among all military observers and staff officers deployed (**Australia, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Cambodia, Japan, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Thailand, Türkiye and Viet Nam**).[75]

Actions must go beyond promoting gender parity to incorporate gender perspectives in capacity building of personnel and the delivery of peacekeeping mandates. To address this issue, **Malaysia** provides training on gender and women's roles in peacekeeping missions, targeting countries in Southeast Asia, through the Malaysia Peacekeeping Centre (MPC). Courses are provided on maintaining a Gender Advisor; Comprehensive Protection of Civilians; Sexual Exploitation and Abuse; Women, Peace and Security; Gender Mainstreaming; and Preventing Sexual Violence. **Cambodia** has also provided specific training and orientation on the WPS agenda in the attempt to increase women's participation in peacekeeping leadership and in various roles such as

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68 ESCAP review of national action plans from respective countries.

69 Philippines, *National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2023-2033* (Manila, 2023).

70 Irene M. Santiago, "The Participation of Women in the Mindanao Peace Process", Research Paper prepared for the United Nations Global Study on 15 Years of Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) (New York, 2015).

71 Farkhondeh Akbari and Jacqui True, "Women, peace and security in Afghanistan: How to support women and girls?", background paper prepared for Malala Fund's UN General Assembly engagements (Melbourne, 2022).

72 United Nations, "Women and Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General", S/2023/725 (New York, 2023).

73 ASEAN Secretariat, "Chairman's Statement on the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting", ASEAN Statements, 24 April 2021 (Jakarta, 2021). Available at https://asean.org/chairmans-statement-on-the-asean-leaders-meeting-24-april-2021-and-five-point-consensus-2/.

74 United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UNDPO), Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy (2018-2028) (New York, 2018).

75 United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UNDPO), "Operational Effect and Women Peacekeepers: Addressing the Gender Imbalance" (March 2024 data). Available at https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/07_gender_statistics_72_march_2024.pdf. (accessed on 31 July 2024).

medical personnel, security personnel, civil engineers and mine clearance experts, and has developed a Gender Mainstreaming Action Group for its military.[76]

6.3.3 Peacebuilding

Women have made a vital contribution to peacebuilding by participating in peacebuilding initiatives at the local level. Often excluded from high-level negotiations and formal mediation, women and women's groups have always played a positive role in building local peace infrastructures. They contribute to resolving communal conflict, restoring social cohesion, negotiating to secure access to water and other vital resources, and supporting the delivery of humanitarian assistance.[77] In **Myanmar**, women came together across ethnic and religious divides to foster social cohesion, alleviate intercommunal tension, provide humanitarian support to groups in vulnerable situations, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. They extended solidarity across gender, ethnic and religious differences in the civil society movement for inclusive and democratic governance.[78] In **Indonesia**, UN-Women and Wahid Foundation supported the Peace Villages initiative to train and mentor women to facilitate dialogues to combat intolerance and extremism, including interfaith dialogues for conflict prevention.[79] By mid-2023, 22 villages have declared themselves "Peacefull Villages".[80] In **Bangladesh**, the Centre for Peace and Justice, the Brac University and UN-Women co-created the Women Peace Café in four universities to allow young female students to receive leadership and social entrepreneurship training, and to create safe spaces for them to develop innovative solutions such as the Women Peace Ambassador initiatives to respond to violent extremism and strengthen social cohesion both online and offline.[81] Despite the tremendous contributions women and girls have made to peace processes, they often are depicted and perceived as passive victims in conflicts with their voices silenced and their experiences invisible in relevant documentation. Recognizing women and girls as active agents of peace and documenting and publicizing their contributions as peacebuilders are of equal importance to allocating funding and other support to their actions in communities.

6.3.4 Law enforcement

Changing security contexts in Asia and the Pacific demand enhancing women's participation and gender mainstreaming in law enforcement. As the need to prevent violent extremism and counter terrorism, cross-border human trafficking and emerging security risks such as cybersecurity arise, more and more countries in the region have recognized the importance of having a gender-inclusive law enforcement workforce. Women's strength in gaining community trust that is important for crime investigation and prevention and working on cases that involve sexual and gender-based violence, has been recognized. Indeed, the emergence of new crimes and security issues have helped shift the focus of police recruitment from physical strength to a broad set of skills. **However, law enforcement remains highly dominated by men in the region**. In 2019, the share of female offices in law enforcement in ASEAN countries ranged from 6 per cent to 20 per cent. Managerial positions were primarily occupied by men, despite the positive trend that more and more female officers are making their way to mid-management positions (12 per cent in Indonesia and 16 per cent in Brunei Darussalam). Female officers in high-ranking positions are particularly scarce. Many countries in the region made efforts to improve women's participation in law enforcement, including through quota policies as an intermediate measure to improve the recruitment of female officers and/or internal policies that require female officers in cases of women in conflict or crimes that involve women (**Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Philippines and Viet Nam**).[82] **Pakistan** launched its first ever National Gender-Responsive Policing Framework in 2024 and has established the National Gender-Responsive Policing Unit to oversee the implementation of the framework.[83]

However, various challenges are reported. In some countries where quotas for female officers exist, they are used as a ceiling to limit the maximum number of women in recruitment practice. Female officers are often put in non-operational functions such as administration rather than operational roles, criminal investigation or specialist operations which are linked to better career advancement. Female officers have

76   ASEAN Secretariat, USAID and UN-Women, *ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security* (Jakarta, 2021).

77   United Nations Secretary-General, "Women and Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General" (New York, 2023), S/2023/725.

78   United Nations, "Letter dated 22 March 2022 from the Permanent Representatives of Ireland, Mexico, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General," S/2022/258 (New York, 2022).

79   ASEAN Secretariat, USAID and UN-Women, *ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security* (Jakarta, 2021).

80   Indonesia, The Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection, National Report on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Nusantara, 2024). Available at https://www.asiapacificgender.org/node/244.

81   UN-Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, "Empowered women, peaceful communities: Results and lessons learned from the regional program on preventing violent extremism in South and Southeast Asia", brief (Bangkok, 2024).

82   UNODC, Interpol, and UN-Women, *"Women in Law Enforcement in the ASEAN Region"* (Bangkok, 2020).

83   The Spokesman, "National Police Bureau Launches Gender Responsive Policing Unit", news, 2 March 2024. Available at: https://dailyspokesman.net/live/national-police-bureau-launches-gender-responsive-policing-unit/ (accessed on 31 July 2024); The Friday Times, "National Police Bureau Launches First Gender-Responsive Policing Framework, Unit", news, 1 March 2024. Available at: https://thefridaytimes.com/01-Mar-2024/national-police-bureau-launches-first-gender-responsive-policing-framework-unit (accessed on 31 July 2024).

reported having limited access to continuous training while there is rarely mandatory training on gender and human rights. Other challenges include gender-biased performance assessment practices and lack of institutional support (such as paternity leaves and childcare support) to address the disproportionate family and childcare responsibilities for female officers. In some countries, social norms continue to limit female officers' ability to travel alone or travel together with their male colleagues, making it difficult for female officers to join operations and attend trainings. [84]

Limited women's participation in peace and security processes is underlined by the persistent underrepresentation of women in politics and in leadership positions, especially in sectors that lead decision making related to peace and security (see relevant data and discussion in Chapter 5). To make transformative change in women's meaningful participation in peace and security, countries need to institutionalize formal mechanisms that mandate, support and empower women's political participation and leadership. Additionally, networking support is another recent and important development for promoting women, peace and security in the region. There currently exist several regional networks for women involved in peace and security processes, including the **Southeast Asia** Women Peacebuilders' Network, the N-Peace Network founded by UNDP, and the Southeast Asia Network of Women Peace Mediators. Such networks also exist at the national level, such as the Women Peace Makers organization and the Alliance for Conflict Transformation in **Cambodia**. Both organizations engage women and youth to address conflict, women's rights and prompt women's roles as agents of change for peace. [85] Such good practices at the subregional and national level should be used to inform broader actions in the region.

BOX 6.2   Timor-Leste's commitment to promoting women's participation in peace and security actions

In Timor-Leste, women's inclusion and meaningful participation in peace and security actions are increasingly prioritized. The national Government – especially the National Directorate for Community Conflict Prevention (DNPCC), the Women's Parliamentary Group of Timor-Leste (GMPTL) and the National Police of Timor-Leste (PNTL) – has demonstrated leadership in incorporating gender perspectives into peace and security strategies. [1]

The country has made firm commitments to drive the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda forward. This includes active participation in the ASEAN regional project, [2] "Empowering Women for Sustainable Peace: Preventing Violence and Promoting Social Cohesion in ASEAN (2021-2025)". [3] In September 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation (MNEC), in collaboration with multiple international organizations, hosted a Women in Leadership and Diplomacy Forum as a component of the regional initiative. The forum addressed the issue of underrepresentation of women in leadership roles and promoted women's influence in creating a fair and peaceful future. Its main goals were to establish a support network for Timorese leaders and improve communication and mentoring platforms for prominent women in different sectors. Support networks were established in the National Parliament, Ministries, Secretariats of State, and mentors included former and current ambassadors, as well as women leaders in diplomacy, politics, and public affairs. [4]

The National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security 2024-2028 (NAP 1325) further exemplifies the country's commitment to integrating women's voices and agency, while acknowledging the need for comprehensive and collaborative efforts by multiple stakeholders to foster peace and security. The active participation of and consultation among government institutions, civil society organizations, and local

Continues on next page

1   UN Women, "Timor-Leste Launches 2nd Generation of Its National Action Plan 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (NAP 1325)", press release, 16 February 2024. Available at: https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/stories/press-release/2024/02/timor-leste-launches-2nd-generation-of-its-national-action-plan-1325 (accessed on 31 July 2024).
2   Timor-Leste was granted official observer status and received in-principal approval to become a member of the ASEAN during the 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits in Cambodia in 2022. It is not yet a full member of the ASEAN.
3   UN Women, "Empowering Women for Sustainable Peace: Preventing Violence and Promoting Social Cohesion in ASEAN", Project Explainer (2022). Available at: wps-asean_project_explainer_20240306.pdf (unwomen.org).
4   Timor-Leste, "Forum on Women in Leadership and Diplomacy Reinforces Commitment to Gender Equality and Sustainable Development", 2023. Available at: https://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=34554&lang=en&n=1 (accessed on 31 July 2024).

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84   UNODC, Interpol, and UN-Women, *Women in Law Enforcement in the ASEAN Region* (Bangkok, 2020).
85   Ibid.

BOX 6.2   Timor-Leste's commitment to promoting women's participation in peace and security actions *(continued)*

communities, has ensured the incorporation of gender equality and women's leadership in all aspects of conflict prevention and resolution, peacebuilding, post-conflict recovery, and humanitarian response in Timor-Leste. This is set out in Timor-Leste's NAP.[5]

In accordance with the NAP, since 2016 the DNPCC has been working to dismantle gender-based discriminatory customary practices and guarantee the meaningful participation of women as conflict mediators.[6] With the aim of promoting an inclusive environment for community conflict mediation and resolution processes, the actions have focused on recruiting and training more women mediators on conflict mediation.[7] In cooperation with UN-Women and other international organizations, the DNPCC increased the number of women mediators deployed across various municipalities from 18 to 21 (out of a total of 42 mediators) between 2019 and 2021,[8] and delivered several gender-sensitive training programs for both women and men mediators.[9] Additionally, in 2023 the first National Mediation Network of Timor-Leste ("Rede Nasionál Mediasaun") was officially established. The National Mediation Network contributes to promoting alternative avenues for resolving disputes and conflicts arising at the community level, as well as collaborating with the Conflict Prevention Network for conflict management and prevention.[10]

In another significant effort to address community conflicts, the GMPTL, with the assistance from UN-Women and other international organizations, organized multiple dialogues with local communities to address significant issues resulting from conflicts. These discussions centered around topics such as justice for victims of violence and shared perspectives on factors contributing to community insecurity, including domestic violence, the marginalization of women, and exclusion from decision-making on community matters.[11]

The PNTL demonstrated its commitment to enhancing women's participation within the policy force and the institution through the official launch of its Gender Strategy (2018-2022) in partnership with various international organizations. A commitment was made to enhancing the representation of women in the community-level PNTL and providing gender equality and gender-based violence training to police officers.[12] Yet more needs to be done to deliver tangible results. Despite some positive change in women officers who have assumed important positions in some municipalities and/or were supported to attend leadership courses aboard,[13] the representation of women within the country's national police force stands at 15 per cent, which falls short of the 18 per cent target set in its Gender Strategy for 2022.[14]

The Government of Timor-Leste has made strides towards fostering an inclusive environment for women to participate in setting and leading the implementation of the WPS agenda. Despite ongoing challenges of underrepresentation, the concerted efforts of government institutions like the DNPCC, the GMPTL and the PNTL can contribute to bolstering women's leadership in national security, law enforcement, and policymaking.

5   UN Women, "Timor-Leste Launches 2nd Generation of Its National Action Plan 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (NAP 1325)", press release, 16 February 2024. Available at: https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/stories/press-release/2024/02/timor-leste-launches-2nd-generation-of-its-national-action-plan-1325 (accessed on 31 July 2024).

6   UN Women, "Women Mediators Breaking Stereotypes and Working to Bring Peace in Timor-Leste", web page. Available at https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2020/06/women-mediators-breaking-stereotypes-and-working-to-bring-peace-in-timor-leste (accessed on 31 July 2024).

7   UN Women, *Timor-Leste Quarterly Newsletter January-March 2020* (Dili, 2020).

8   Ibid. and José De Sà, "UN-Women offers financial support of sixty thousand US dollars to SEPC for DNPCC", TATOLI Agência Noticiosa De Timor-Leste, 29 July 2021. Available at https://en.tatoli.tl/2021/08/21/sscp-and-stakehorlders-to-launch-second-period-of-women-mediators-training/19/ (accessed on 31 July 2024).

9   José De Sà, "NDCP and UNW to provide capacity building for mediators across municipalities", TATOLI Agência Noticiosa De Timor-Leste, 3 August 2021. Available at https://en.tatoli.tl/2021/08/03/ndcp-and-unw-to-provide-capacity-building-for-mediators-across-municipalities/11/ (accessed on 31 July 2024); José De Sà, "SSCP and Stakeholders to launch second period of Women mediators training", TATOLI Agência Noticiosa De Timor-Leste, 21 August 2021. Available at https://en.tatoli.tl/2021/08/21/sscp-and-stakeholders-to-launch-second-period-of-women-mediators-training/19/ (accessed on 31 July 2024).

10   José De Sà, "UNW and MoI launch National Mediation Network to promote Alternative Dispute Resolution", TATOLI Agência Noticiosa De Timor-Leste, 31 July 2023. Available at https://en.tatoli.tl/2023/07/31/unw-and-moi-launch-national-mediation-network-to-promote-alternative-dispute-resolution/16/ (accessed on 31 July 2024).

11   Silverio Beli-Siri Andrade da Silva, "Survivors meet with women of parliament in Timor-Leste", Chega! Ba Ita, 3 September 2019. Available at https://chegabaita.org/blog/news/survivors-meet-with-women-of-parliament-in-timor-leste/; UN Women, "Timor-Leste's women parliamentarians engage with rural women on issues of peace and security, past and present", blog, 19 November 2013. Available at https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2013/11/timor-lestes-women-parliamentarians (accessed on 31 July 2024).

12   UN Women, "National Police of Timor-Leste is committed to promote gender equality in the institution by unveiling its first Gender Strategy for 2018-2022", blog, 20 August 2018. Available at https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2018/08/national-police-of-timor-leste-is-committed-to-promote-gender-equality (accessed on 31 July 2024).

13   Da Costa, M., "PR concerned about the position of women in the PNTL", Timor Post Português, news, 16 August 2022. Available at https://pt.timorpost.com/geral-pt/tp-23498/pr-preocupado-com-posicao-das-mulheres-na-pntl/ (accessed on 31 July 2024).

14   UN Women, "Timor-Leste Launches 2nd Generation of Its National Action Plan 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (NAP 1325)", press release, 16 February 2024. Available at: https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/stories/press-release/2024/02/timor-leste-launches-2nd-generation-of-its-national-action-plan-1325 (accessed on 31 July 2024).

BOX 6.3 **The role of women's networks in advancing gender equity in law enforcement in Pacific Island countries and South Asia**

The establishment of women's networks in Pacific Island countries, Bangladesh and Pakistan is a notable example of promoting gender equity and mainstreaming in police services across the Pacific and South-Asia subregions.

Operating within the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police (PICP) since 2003, the Women Advisory Networks (WANs) advise the regional body on issues impacting women in policing. Currently there are 22 members[1] in the PICP, with the Commissioner, Chief or Director of Police of each national police service representing a member State.[2] Under the WAN Strategic Direction 2020-2024, WANs commit to supporting the Chiefs' collective vision of 'Our Blue Pacific: Safer together' through its mission to empower women to effect positive changes for a safer Pacific.[3] This includes empowering a network of women; strengthening productive partnerships between Chiefs and their WAN; and advancing and reforming Pacific policing for women, with women.[4] A recent achievement at the national level is the establishment of a Sexual Assault Unit headed by a female officer within the Royal Salomon Islands Police Force.[5]

In South Asia, Bangladesh initiated the establishment of its Police's Women Network (BPWN) in 2008,[6] as part of the Police Reform Program, today comprising over 15,000 women police officers.[7] The BPWN has recently published its new Strategic Plan 2021-2023, with the objective of ensuring the complete participation of women in the police force departments, prioritizing their welfare, professional advancement, and an equitable allocation of resources and opportunities. Additionally, the Strategic Plan advocates to maximize female police officers' contribution in supporting police forces to provide a gender responsive policing service.[8]

In Pakistan, Women Police Councils (WPC) were established in all provinces in 2022, and the National Fellowship Conference for WPC was conducted.[9] The conference offered training to the newly appointed members of the WPCs, who formulated their respective WPC annual plans.[10] The WPCs have made recommendations to appoint women officers as heads of police stations and official complaint registrars. The recommendation was welcome, and several women officers were appointed leadership roles in police stations in Lahore and Islamabad.[11] Additionally, the WPCs have formed committees to tackle harassment problems and implemented gender sensitivity training. Moreover, the WPCs play a key role in promoting the professional growth of women officers, facilitating the establishment of female restrooms and childcare centres in police facilities, and addressing individual service-related concerns.[12]

These networks in the Pacific, Bangladesh and Pakistan serve as a remarkable illustration of regional collaboration and national networks that contribute to the fulfilment of the respective countries' obligations outlined in their National Action Plans for Women, Peace, and Security, especially with regard to law enforcement. Additionally, they can act as facilitators for mainstreaming gender perspectives into national strategies that seek to promote equal and meaningful participation of women in law enforcement.

1 American Samoa, Australia, Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Tokelau.

2 Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police (PICP), "Our Blue Pacific Together", web page. Available at: https://www.picp.co.nz/ (accessed on 31 July 2024).

3 Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police (PICP), *Strategic Plan 2020-2024* (n.p., 2020).

4 Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police (PICP), "Our Work: Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police," web page. Available at: https://www.picp.co.nz/our-work (accessed on 31 July 2024).

5 Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF), "RSIPF WAN AGM Highlights Successes," web page. Available at: https://www.rsipf.gov.sb/?q=node/1617 (accessed on 31 July 2024).

6 Bangladesh Police Women Network (BPWN), "Home," web page. Available at: https://www.bpwn.org.bd/index.php (accessed on 31 July 2024).

7 Bangladesh Police Women Network (BPWN), Strategic Plan 2021-2023 (Dhaka, 2021). Available at: https://www.bpwn.org.bd/strategy2021.php (accessed on 31 July 2024).

8 Ibid.

9 Kayani, A., and Siddiqui, J., "In Pakistan, women police push for gender equality: Women Police Councils offer a path toward greater inclusion for women in Pakistan's male-dominated police force," blog, United States Institute of Peace, 23 March 2023. Available at: https://www.usip.org/blog/2023/03/pakistan-women-police-push-gender-equality (accessed on 31 July 2024).

10 Daily Lead Pakistan, "Women police councils in the four provinces of Pakistan, Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan have been established," Daily Lead Pakistan, 25 October 2022. Available at: https://leadpakistan.com.pk/news/women-police-councils-in-the-four-provinces-of-pakistan-kashmir-and-gilgit-baltistan-have-been-established/ (accessed on 31 July 2024).

11 Ahmed, S., "Lahore police to appoint more female investigators," ProPakistani, 22 August 2022. Available at: https://propakistani.pk/2022/08/22/lahore-police-to-appoint-more-female-investigators/ (accessed on 31 July 2024); Sajid, A., "A dozen women officers given leadership roles at Islamabad's police stations," ProPakistani, 11 November 2022. Available at: https://propakistani.pk/2022/11/11/a-dozen-women-officers-given-leadership-roles-at-islamabads-police-stations/ (accessed on 31 July 2024).

12 Kayani, A., & Siddiqui, J., "In Pakistan, women police push for gender equality: Women Police Councils offer a path toward greater inclusion for women in Pakistan's male-dominated police force," United States Institute of Peace, 3 March 2023. Available at: https://www.usip.org/blog/2023/03/pakistan-women-police-push-gender-equality (accessed on 31 July 2024).

6.4 PROTECTION OF WOMEN AND GIRLS FROM SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT AND EMERGENCY SETTINGS

Protecting women's and girls' human rights and from sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is an essential precondition for women's meaningful participation in peace and security processes. SGBV devastates women's ability to participate in peace and security processes by creating terrors, jeopardizing humanitarian assistance (much of which is delivered by women and women's organizations), and inhibiting voluntary, safe and sustainable returns of those displaced. SGBV has also tremendous immediate physical and psychological health consequences that can impact the survivors over the long term. While women and girls are disproportionately affected, conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence is not exclusively perpetrated on women and girls. Men and boys, persons of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as women and men with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities, can be subject to conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence and their experiences of such violence are often even more underreported. A more intersectional approach is needed to better understand and address the issue.

6.4.1 Prevalence of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

In conflict-affected areas, sexual and gender-based violence is not only a by-product of fragility but a deliberate tactic for destabilization and repression. In 2022 alone, the United Nations verified 2,455 reported cases of conflict-related sexual violence while many more went unreported or cannot be verified.[86] Widespread attacks — from harassment, threats, disinformation, and hate speech to killings — against women, girls, women human rights defenders and civil society organizations working in the field of human rights in conflict-affected settings continue. **An increasing trend of these acts has also been observed in the Asia-Pacific region.** They are systematically deployed to silence the voices, and discredit the work, of women and girls, women human rights defenders and civil society organizations.

In **Myanmar**, sexual assaults in detention settings against political prisoners, participants in the civil disobedience movement and LGBTI activists, as well as online hate speech and reprisals against women human rights defenders and politically active women, have been reported since the military coup in 2021. A continuing trend of conflict-related sexual violence including rape, killings and trafficking perpetrated on civilians within the borders of Myanmar and against **Rohingya refugees** from Myanmar in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh have been observed.[87, 88] The Security Council adopted resolution 2669 on Myanmar in December 2022, urging the de facto authorities to protect the rights of women and children and to ensure safe and unhindered humanitarian process.

In **Afghanistan**, 42 per cent of Afghan women human rights defenders and leaders had to escape Kabul after the Taliban's takeover in 2021 without any assistance in their resettlement processes.[89] Harassment against and detention of women protesters was reported in 2022. With grave difficulty in obtaining data on cases of conflict-related sexual violence, the United Nations Assistance Mission managed to verify 30 cases in 2022, affecting 16 girls and 14 boys. In the previous year, more than 80 cases of murder, rape, forced and child marriage, assault and "honour" killings were documented. None had been prosecuted by the justice system under the de facto authorities.[90] Afghan women have been banned from working in non-governmental organizations and for the United Nations since April 2023,[91, 92] hampering their access to and participation in humanitarian assistance. As a result, half of female-headed households mentioned that the reduction in female aid workers was one of the reasons that they were not able to access humanitarian services.[93] In addition, more than half of the safe spaces for women and girls across the country in operation in 2021 had suspended their operation by the end of 2022.[94]

86   United Nations Secretary-General, "Women and Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General" (New York, 2023), S/2023/725.
87   United Nations, "Letter dated 22 March 2022 from the Permanent Representatives of Ireland, Mexico, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General," S/2022/258 (New York, 2022).
88   United Nations Security Council, "Conflict-related sexual violence, Report of the Secretary-General," S/2023/413 (New York, 22 June 2023).
89   United Nations Secretary-General, "Women and Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General" (New York, 2023), S/2023/725.
90   United Nations Security Council, "Conflict-related sexual violence, Report of the Secretary-General," S/2023/413 (New York, 22 June 2023).
91   Ibid.
92   Farkhondeh Akbari and Jacqui True, *Women, Peace and Security in Afghanistan: How to Support Women and Girls?* (Background paper prepared for Malala Fund's UN General Assembly engagements, September 2022).
93   OCHA, "Afghanistan: Humanitarian Update - March 2024" (Geneva and New York, 2024).
94   United Nations Security Council, "Conflict-related sexual violence, Report of the Secretary-General," S/2023/413 (New York, 22 June 2023).

6.4.2 Actions to address conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence

Actions to address conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence and survivor-centred safeguard and support systems exist but are far from sufficient. In **Myanmar**, IOM partnered with UNFPA and other organizations to train CSO legal service providers on better assisting SGBV and trafficking survivors in navigating legal systems and seeking support. The training covered topics such as legal frameworks, survivor-centred case management, referral pathways, and trauma-informed care.[95] Despite such efforts, significant challenges remain. Effective responses require a coordinated approach across sectors, including healthcare, legal support, mental health services, and economic reintegration. There are sectors which are often not fully functioning in conflict settings. Maintaining a quality-assured referral pathway is particularly difficult in these areas due to the high likelihood of infrastructure and coordination system disruptions.[96]

Building resilience, especially for populations in vulnerable situations, is key to the prevention of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence. States should be held accountable for upholding their human rights responsibilities. However, the level of compliance by parties to a conflict with relevant international laws and norms remains low.[97] While restoring institutional resilience is crucial, States and international actors are also responsible for assisting populations in vulnerable situations build economic and security resilience to prevent conflict. Building institutional, economic and social resilience helps communities better weather crises and mitigate risks of increased sexual and gender-based violence. This strategy has shaped actions by various United Nations entities and the World Bank in **Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh** where nearly one million Rohingya refugees are living, 52 per cent of whom are women and girls.[98]

Projects run by IOM, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNODC and UN-Women in **Myanmar** and in **Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh** to prevent and address conflict-related sexual violence combine actions to strengthen institutional and community mechanisms for prevention and response. They focus on building the resilience of groups vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse and gender-based violence by providing them with awareness of the risks, help-seeking guidance and economic empowerment.[99] The World Bank's Emergency Multi-Sectoral Rohingya Crisis Response Project (2019-2025) takes a multi-sectoral approach to strengthen the capacity of the Government of Bangladesh to build social resilience of the displaced Rohingya population. It combines contingent emergency response with interventions to strengthen service delivery related to water, sanitation, sexual and reproductive health care and GBV prevention and response. It extends support to households in host communities to manage the economic and social impacts of the refugee crisis.[100]

The World Bank has adopted a similar approach in **Türkiye** to address the Syrian refugee crisis, where 3.6 million refugees have fled the war since 2011.[101] The 2021 Syrian Women Refugee Job Creation Program established four social cooperatives in Ankara, İzmir, İstanbul, and Mersin in Türkiye between August 2020 and December 2021. These cooperatives, aimed at Syrian refugee women and marginalized women in host communities, create quality jobs, reduce barriers to labour force participation, and foster community cohesion. The Project also provides childcare support, transportation, daily stipends, and other financial support to help women refugees and local women overcome socioeconomic barriers.[102]

The United Nations and international humanitarian forces continue to play a critical role in addressing sexual and gender-based violence in conflict settings. To date, the United Nations Security Council has called for the deployment of women's protection advisors in the mandate authorizations and renewals of ten peace operations around the world. Such advisors have been deployed to eight countries (as of June 2023). Dedicated monitoring and early warning mechanisms have been established in four peacekeeping missions and four special political missions.[103] These practices have been found to have positive effects in ensuring more timely, accurate and reliable information and action-

95   IOM Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, *Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Information Sheet, October-December 2021* (NA, 2021).

96   IOM, *Institutional Framework for Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Crises* (Geneva, 2019).

97   United Nations Security Council, "Conflict-related sexual violence, Report of the Secretary-General," S/2023/413 (New York, 22 June 2023).

98   World Bank Group, *Fragility, Conflict, and Violence (FCV): A Development Approach to Advancing Gender Engagement and Addressing Gender Inequalities in Fragile, Conflict, and Violent Situations* (Washington, D.C., 2024).

99   Stop Rape Now – UN Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict, "Field Updates: Myanmar," web page. Available at: https://www.stoprapenow.org/field_updates/myanmar/ (accessed on 9 June 2024).

100   World Bank Group, *Fragility, Conflict, and Violence (FCV): A Development Approach to Advancing Gender Engagement and Addressing Gender Inequalities in Fragile, Conflict, and Violent Situations* (Washington, D.C., 2024).

101   UNHCR Türkiye, "Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Türkiye," web page. Available at https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-turkey (accessed on 30 July 2024).

102   World Bank Group, *Fragility, Conflict, and Violence (FCV): A Development Approach to Advancing Gender Engagement and Addressing Gender Inequalities in Fragile, Conflict, and Violent Situations* (Washington, D.C., 2024).

103   United Nations Security Council, "Conflict-related sexual violence, Report of the Secretary-General," S/2023/413 (New York, 22 June 2023).

taking. They are, however, challenged by human and budgetary resource constraints, without earmarked contributions in the regular budgets of the United Nations peace operations. Interagency efforts across 25 UN entities to prevent and respond to conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence has been coordinated by the United Nations Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict network, with support from a multi-partner trust fund.

In the Asia-Pacific region, the multi-partner trust fund has supported actions in **Myanmar** and in **Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh**.[104] In addition, the UN has taken special measures to prevent and address sexual exploitation and abuse committed by United Nations personnel, including in conflict settings.[105] The efforts to address sexual and gender-based violence in conflicts need to be backed by a more comprehensive mechanism to address gender issues in humanitarian settings. The **Asia Pacific Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group**, co-chaired by UN-Women, UNOCHA and Plan International, was set up to integrate a comprehensive gender perspective across all response sectors. By 2023, the Working Group had supported humanitarian responses in Afghanistan, Bangladesh including Cox's Bazar, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and the Philippines. It produces gender analyses and assessments to inform response plans; facilitates direct participation of local women focused organizations in humanitarian planning and response processes; and builds a network of national and sub-national working groups and communities of practice on gender in humanitarian action.[106]

6.5	ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR WOMEN IN ALL THEIR DIVERSITY

Access to justice is an integral part of peaceful and just societies. Lack of access to justice means that conflicts remain unresolved, and people cannot obtain protection and redress. Failure to provide justice is tantamount to tolerating human rights violations which can themselves lead to violence. Women's justice needs are highly complex. Upholding their rights is a challenge as their needs relate to issues linked to family, marriage, property, inheritance and land disputes to rights to work, labour exploitation, harassment and violence, immigration and asylum

seeking. There is also a need for criminal justice for women in conflict with the law. Where the situation of women is worst in terms of inclusion, justice and security – countries in the bottom tercile of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Index — women are more likely to have unmet justice needs and unresolved legal problems. They are less likely to know where to get legal advice. Women are more likely than men to experience challenges related to family legal problems related to separation and divorce, domestic violence, receiving child support, harassment at work, workplace discrimination, sexual assault and other forms of gender-based violence.[107]

6.5.1 Level of legal protection

Major gaps remain in the legal protection provided to women and girls in Asia and the Pacific — both on paper and in practice — which shape their justice needs. The World Bank's Women, Business and Law initiative measures laws related to women's mobility, workplace, pay, marriage, parenthood, entrepreneurship, assets, and pension. It found that legal gaps for the protection of women's rights are the largest in South Asia, and East Asia and the Pacific, only second to Middle East and North Africa. Nonetheless, only 9 per cent of legal reforms undertaken by the world's economies between October 2022 and October 2023 to improve legal protection of women took place in East Asia and the Pacific, and none in South Asia. This is despite champions like **Malaysia** and **Uzbekistan**, which have undertaken commendable reforms to improve women's rights in relation to the workplace, pay, marriage and parenthood. The implementation of laws which protect women's rights, where they do exist, is also weak in these regions due to insufficient frameworks to support their implementation.[108]

The experience of multiple and overlapping discrimination and barriers increases the likelihood of women and girls facing justice related problems. Depending on the socioeconomic and family status of individual women and girls, and various factors such as ethnicity, location and disability, women and girls can face various barriers to accessing legal and justice services. Such barriers can relate to legal identity, legal capacity recognized by law, legal literacy, language, financial resources and the ability to travel alone and away from home.

104 Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, "UN Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict," web page. Available at https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/about-us/un-action/#:~:text=UN%20Action%20Against%20Sexual%20Violence%20in%20Conflict%20%28UN,during%20and%20in%20the%20wake%20of%20armed%20conflict (accessed on 5 June 2024).

105 United Nations, "Sexual exploitation and abuse: implementing a zero-tolerance policy; Administrative and budgetary aspects of the financing of the United Nations peacekeeping operations; Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, Report of the Secretary-General," A/77/748 (New York, 2023).

106 Asia Pacific Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group, "Summary of 2023 country-level GIHA activities", infographic (n.p., 2024).

107 UN-Women, International Development Law Organization (IDLO), World Bank, and Task Force on Justice, *Justice for Women: High-level Group Report* (New York, 2019).

108 World Bank, *Women, Business and the Law 2024* (Washington, D.C., 2024).

BOX 6.4   A snapshot of justice gaps for women with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities in Asia and the Pacific

The rights of women with disabilities are promoted and protected by all international human rights frameworks, and most explicitly in the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The most relevant article of the CEDAW for women's access to justice is Article 15, which guarantees the right to equal recognition before the law, including the right to legal capacity, which is essential for the right to access justice. However, CEDAW does not make explicit mention of women and girls with disabilities.

The CRPD is the first international human rights treaty to recognize that persons with disabilities are rights holders and legal decision makers. Article 6 of CRPD provides specific protection for women and girls with disabilities and Article 12 further enumerates the rights of persons with disabilities to equal recognition before the law and legal capacity. Article 13 of the CRPD provides for the right to access to justice for persons with disabilities, including the opportunity for victims/survivors of human rights violations to receive redress. It covers all fora and procedures involved in the administration of justice. In Asia and the Pacific, 49 out of 53 ESCAP members and one associate member have ratified or acceded to CEDAW,[1,2] and 50 out of 53 ESCAP members and one associate member have ratified or acceded to CRPD,[3,4] as of April 2024.

Women and girls with disabilities are more likely to face discrimination than their peers without disabilities, or than men and boys with disabilities, regarding education, employment, legal capacity, political participation and autonomous living. They are at greater risk of poverty and violence, exploitation and abuse.[5] Because women and girls with disabilities are often stereotyped as unable to fulfill traditional roles as mothers and care givers and are perceived as recipients of care and protection, human rights violations against them are normalized. In particular, women and girls with disabilities — and other persons with disabilities — are often denied legal capacity due the inaccurate perception that they are incapable of exercising legal capacity, which disproportionately affects persons with intellectual and/or psychosocial disabilities. This misperception overlooks evidence that they can make "rational" decisions guided by emotion or instinct even if some may require a certain degree of support to make their own decisions.[6]

A UN Women-led legal needs survey in four Asia-Pacific countries – Fiji, Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines – in 2022 found that women with intellectual and/or psychosocial disabilities face entrenched barriers to access justice. The majority of respondents (96 per cent) indicated experiencing at least one legal problem in the past two years, related to issues ranging from consumer rights, land and housing, to family, relationship and violence, to work, education and health care. However, they were often hesitant to describe their problems as "legal" and often described them as "bad luck", "family or private matters" or "social/community matters". This points to the need to raise legal awareness. Only 26 per cent of respondents identified their problem as resolved. When these challenges did get resolved, 73 per cent felt that the outcomes were unfair to them. Only 34 per cent took their legal problem to a formal justice actor. The majority sought advice from family, friends or acquaintances or other informal groups, networks or community organizations. Respondents indicated the reasons for not seeking legal advice being concerns about the legal process being stressful, being scared to take legal action and the financial burden.[7]

Reforms are needed to remove larger systemic barriers that women with intellectual and/or psychosocial disabilities face when engaging with the formal justice system, such as discrimination and stigma against women with disabilities in law enforcement, and inaccessible court proceedings. In the meantime, State and non-State actors, including organizations of persons with disabilities and women's groups, need to collaborate to improve legal awareness and provide legal assistance to women with disabilities, as well as to transform attitudinal barriers and norms in the communities.

1   United Nations Treaty Collection (UNTC), "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW): Ratification Status," web page. Available at https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-8&chapter=4&clang=_en (accessed on 5 June 2024).
2   Afghanistan ratified the CEDAW on 5 May 2003 and Myanmar acceded to it on 22 July 1997.
3   UNTC, "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD): Ratification Status," web page. Available at https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-15&chapter=4&clang=_en (accessed on 5 June 2024).
4   Afghanistan acceded to the CRPD on 18 September 2012 and Myanmar acceded to it on 7 December 2011.
5   United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), "General Comment No. 3 on Women and Girls with Disabilities," CRPD/C/GC/3 (Geneva, 2016).
6   United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), "General Comment No. 1: Article 12 – Equal Recognition before the Law," CRPD/C/GC/1, para. 9 (Geneva, 2014).
7   UN-Women, *Closing the Justice Gap for Women with Intellectual and/or Psychosocial Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific* (Bangkok, 2023).

6.5.2 Delivery of justice services

Justice systems in the region fail to extend sufficient justice services to women and girls in need. Despite the high prevalence of various forms of violence against women and girls within and outside of the home, underreporting and barriers to help-seeking remain two major challenges,[109] which to some extent reflects the lack of trust in the justice systems.[110] While awareness about the unacceptability of violence is rising and countries in the region are increasingly passing laws to address violence against women and girls, institutional support to enable and encourage reporting and investment to improve court practices and legal services in dealing with such cases remains insufficient. The capacity of justice systems is even more challenged in conflict-affected settings, where sexual and gender-based violence are even less likely to be reported and punished, in dealing with emerging forms of safety and security threats such as online abuse and harassment.[111] Similar challenges exist in delivering justice to women and girls concerning their family, marriage, economic and other rights. Besides, the need for criminal justice for women as suspects, accused and detainees is often overlooked, and in some scenarios, women human rights defenders and activists are detained and criminalized because of their activism. Justice systems in the region face challenges in addressing the justice needs of children in contact with the law. They frequently fall short of sufficiently protecting girls and boys who are victims, survivors and witnesses of crimes, in compliance of international child protection standards.[112]

Entrenched biases and gender stereotypes, including those held by justice sector actors, contribute to the failure of justice systems to respond to the needs of women and girls and vulnerable groups. While legal rights may appear to be gender neutral, gendered stereotypes perpetuating inequalities women and girls face across the family and society affects their access to justice. Judges and other justice professionals are influenced by biases and gender stereotypes. Common gender stereotypes in legal cases include assumptions about women's role in the family, their credibility or reliability, rape myths that blame women and girls for the perpetrators' criminal behaviours, and discrimination and stigma against persons of diverse sexual orientation and gender diversity. Court processes and decisions based on gender stereotypes or on evidence presented in a discriminatory manner sabotage justice integrity as much as they harm women and girls. The same gender stereotypes penetrate not only the formal but also informal justice systems.[113] While women judges are not automatically less influenced by biases and gender stereotypes, the underrepresentation of women in the judiciary and in politics across Asia-Pacific countries contributes to the challenge of transforming gender social norms in the justice sector (see more discussion in Chapter 5).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the justice gaps and the lack of resilience of justice systems. Lockdowns and emergency orders have led to a multitude of repercussions, exacerbating existing risks for women in abusive relationships, for those working in vulnerable conditions and without job security, for women and girls at risk of harmful practices and discriminatory laws, as well as those in fragile humanitarian settings. With resources diverted towards immediate public health measures, institutions such as the courts, hotlines/helplines, crisis centres, legal aid and social welfare services were often curtailed.[114] Some countries (**Australia, China, Malaysia and the Republic of Korea**) innovated to continue justice services by digital means.[115, 116] Yet many women and girls and other vulnerable groups, especially older persons and those in rural and remote areas, have experienced additional barriers in using digital justice services due to lack of digital literacy, access to Internet connectivity or

109 UNFPA, "Measuring prevalence of violence against women in Asia-Pacific" web page. KNOWVAW Data indicator: Help-seeking after violence. Available at: https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/knowvawdata#:~:text=Globally%2C%20addressing%20violence%20against%20women,hands%20of%20an%20intimate%20partner (accessed on 5 June 2024).

110 Justice systems in a broad term include the police, health services, judiciary, prosecution, social services, prison services, lawyers, paralegals, community justice workers and other legal aid providers. See UN-Women, IDLO, World Bank and Task Force on Justice, *Justice for Women: High-level Group Report* (New York and Washington, D.C., 2019). Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Justice-for-women-High-level-group-report-en.pdf.

111 UN-Women, IDLO, World Bank and Task Force on Justice. *Justice for Women: High-level Group Report* (New York and Washington, D.C., 2019).

112 UNICEF, "Justice for children", web page. Available at https://www.unicef.org/protection/justice-for-children (accessed on 14 July 2024).

113 "Informal justice systems" refers to all conflict resolution and justice mechanisms that operate outside of the formal or State legal system. This includes religious and customary systems, alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, and popular justice forums. See UN-Women, IDLO, World Bank and Task Force on Justice, *Justice for Women: High-level Group Report* (New York and Washington, D.C., 2019).

114 UNODC, "Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Response –UNODC Thematic Brief on Gender-Based Violence against Women and Girls", (United Nations, 2020). Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/Advocacy-Section/GBVAW_and_UNODC_in_COVID19_final_7Apr2020.pdf.

115 UN-Women, IDLO, UNDP, UNODC, World Bank and The Pathfinders, *Justice for Women amidst COVID-19* (2020). Available at: https://www.undp.org/publications/justice-women-amidst-covid-19.

116 OECD, *Access to Justice: Compendium of Country Practices*, accessed June 5, 2024, available at: https://www.oecd.org/governance/global-roundtables-access-to-justice/access-to-justice-compendium-of-country-practices.pdf.

mobile phones.[117] For the cases of violence, many survivor support services were not considered part of essential services that were maintained under emergency circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Many women and vulnerable groups were left with even more precarious access to justice compared to pre-pandemic times.

With an increasingly digital landscape, including the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the legal field, justice system reforms need to account for the "double-edge" effects of AI-driven tools. On the one hand, such tools offer efficient solutions ranging from automated data entry to predicting court processes or generating draft decisions using a predictive algorithm. On the other hand, the use of AI in case processing and legal decision-making must be approached with great caution to ensure transparency while protecting data and privacy. Using AI to support the processing of cases must comply with fundamental constitutional principles and human rights, as well as the possibilities of AI reinforcing gender and other biases and stereotypes. A survey among judges in the ASEAN region in 2021 on emerging technologies and judicial integrity suggests that electronic filing platforms and electronic/automated case management systems are most commonly used by courts in ASEAN. The use of virtual hearing and AI tools in court proceedings are not yet prevalent but emerging. Judges participating in the survey were generally positive about the impact of new technologies on the transparency of hearing processes and court decisions and making court services more accessible to everyone, especially women who often face safety concerns, economic barriers and time poverty and persons with disabilities. However, they also cited various concerns about security, confidentiality protection, as well as equity in relation to literacy, internet access and economic status.[118]

Transitional justice mechanisms are critical to the implementation of the WPS agenda. Yet existing mechanisms in the region remain largely ineffective. Impunity remains the norm in the most fragile contexts. Perpetrators can be affiliated to State or non-State armed groups, terrorist groups, transnational criminal networks and even peacekeeping and security personnel,

as well as humanitarian workers. Weakened or collapsed justice institutions in conflict-affected areas, and the increasing use of largely ungoverned digital platforms, have compounded challenges for accountability of perpetrators, protection and reparation for survivors, or truth-seeking for victims/survivors. For many women and girls who are survivors of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, seeking justice or recourse could subject them to further vulnerability due to stigma, retaliation and reprisal.[119]

Transitional justice processes and mechanisms are set up to investigate violations of human rights that occur in the past, bring perpetrators to justice, help victims/survivors rebuild their lives and dignity. They also aim to reform laws and institutions to ensure that the mass violations will not recur.[120] It can also contribute to fighting against impunity for violations of economic, social and cultural rights, and to their prevention.[121] In particular, reparations have the potential to dismantle the structural inequality and discrimination that drive sexual violence.[122] Both judicial and non-judicial mechanisms have been established in several Asia-Pacific countries to support transitional justice processes. But the implementation of these mechanisms is not without major challenges. These transitional justice processes and mechanisms are commonly undermined by un-sustained political will, the absence of a holistic approach which incorporates all key aspects of transitional justice and reforms to prevent the recurrence of human rights violations, and insufficient participation of women's groups and civil society groups.[123] While women and girls are often disproportionately affected by human rights violations and structural discriminations, transitional justice processes have not always been well designed to empower women and girls and address sexual and gender-based violence they face.[124]

Improving access to justice for women and girls requires a holistic approach to eliminate discriminatory laws and regulation across all domains, to systematically strengthen the prevention and response to intimate partner violence, to increase women's representation in the workforce and leadership positions, including in the judiciary and police forces, and to increase funding support

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117 UNDP, *Emerging Technologies and Judicial Integrity in ASEAN* (Bangkok, 2021).

118 Ibid.

119 United Nations Security Council, "Conflict-related sexual violence, Report of the Secretary-General," S/2023/413 (New York, 2023).

120 United Nations, *Guidance Note of the Secretary-General: United Nations Approach to Transitional Justice* (New York, 2010).

121 United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Transitional Justice and Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights* (Geneva, 2014).

122 United Nations Security Council, *The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post-conflict Societies: Report of the Secretary-General*, S/2011/634 (New York, 2011).

123 Transitional Justice Asia Network, "Transitional Justice Asia Network," web page. Available at: https://asia-ajar.org/transitional-justice-asia-network/ (accessed on 5 June 2024).

124 Radhika Coomaraswamy, *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325* (New York, 2015).

to legal assistance and justice services for women. It will require reforms in the justice systems designed specifically to remove discriminatory provisions, procedures and practices against the most vulnerable — women and girls facing multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination — and investment in substantially improving the capacities of justice systems to deliver gender-responsive, accessible and inclusive services for all, including at times of emergencies. A closer collaboration between formal and informal justice systems, including grassroots bodies working on women's rights, is equally essential.

On the other hand, to fully access justice, women and girls need legal, economic and body autonomy. They need control over income and financial resources, health and childcare support, and sufficient literacy and education levels. They have to confront familial and societal pressure to excuse or defend their abusers who are often intimate partners or someone they know, as well as shame, stigmatization, victimization and even retaliation in the search for justice. Therefore, systematically transforming the structural barriers women face and harmful gender social norms are of equal importance to gender-responsive justice systems reform.

BOX 6.5   Bangkok General Guidance for Judges on Applying a Gender Perspective in South and Southeast Asia (2022)

The judiciary is one of the most important building blocks of justice systems. Making the judiciary gender responsive is critical for access to justice by women and girls. In June 2016, judges from **Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Timor-Leste** adopted the first edition of the General Guidance for Judges in applying a gender perspective at a judicial dialogue organized by the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) and UN-Women in Bangkok. Since then, the Supreme Court of Indonesia has integrated the General Guidance into its domestic practice through Supreme Court Regulation No. 3 of 2017.

In 2021, ICJ brought together a drafting panel and a working group of six judges from South Asia to amend the 2016 General Guidance with a view to contextualizing it in a manner that would be equally applicable to the South Asia subregion. The updated edition was launched by judges from Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in May 2022.

The 2022 Bangkok General Guidance provides assistance to judges. It supports their understanding and application of gender equality and non-discrimination principles and identifies harmful gender stereotypes which must be eliminated to ensure access to justice for all. The initiative guides all justice sector professionals in all areas of law, ranging from court officers, police officers, prosecutors, mediators, arbitrators, facilitators, lawyers, social workers, medical practitioners, forensic experts to civil society representatives, on identifying situations that could lead to gender-based discrimination. The recommendations it gives contribute to the implementation of a justice system that guarantees the rights of all to equal access to fair and gender-sensitive investigation processes, court proceedings, mediation processes, adjudication and enforcement of judgments. Additionally, the General Guidance also addresses recommendations with respect to institutional policies, such as gender parity in judicial appointments, gender-friendly justice infrastructure and procedures, gender disaggregated justice data collection and gender mainstreaming in judicial training curricula. These are to be adopted by the courts to help them become more gender sensitive and responsive.[1]

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1   International Commission of Jurists, *Bangkok General Guidance for Judges on Applying a Gender Perspective in South and Southeast Asia* (Geneva, 2022).

Women learn how to use social media platforms to promote peaceful and resilient communities in Java island in Indonesia. © ASEAN

6.6 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The WPS agenda is a transformative strategy to leave no one behind in conflict-affected and emergency settings and address the underlying ideologies and conditions that tolerate violence, drive conflict and create security risks in the first place. Women's full and meaningful participation in building peace and fostering security should be central to the WPS agenda, and it should be a norm rather than an aspiration. Meanwhile, transforming institutional settings and practices of the justice systems is essential to guaranteeing access to justice for all. The United Nation Secretary-General's New Agenda for Peace [125] calls for Member States to "transform gendered power dynamics in peace and security", as one of his recommendations for addressing current and emerging peace and security challenges, from the threat of nuclear weapons and small arms to technology-facilitated warfare and violence, and climate-related insecurity. He further pledged 15 per cent of official development assistance (ODA) to projects where gender equality is a key objective, including a minimum one per cent of ODA directly to women's organizations, especially grass-roots groups working for peace.

In this context, countries in the Asia-Pacific region are encouraged to consider the following actions:

+ Support member States to localize the WPS agenda based on their national and subnational contexts, developing designated national/subnational action plans or incorporating the WPS agenda into other relevant action plans, policies and strategies. Ensure sufficient financial support and robust monitoring and evaluation for the effective implementation relevant actions.

+ Create synergy between the implementation of the WPS agenda and other relevant agendas such ending violence against women and girls, violent extremism prevention and climate security. Accord high priority to addressing human security concerns, increasing women's participation and leadership, and transforming harmful social norms as the root causes.

+ Deploy regular and sustainable capacity to bolster WPS expertise in the region, particularly among decision makers and personnel in the peace and security sectors, at the national and subnational levels. Pay special attention to emerging security

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125 United Nations, *Our Common Agenda: Policy Brief 9: A New Agenda for Peace* (New York, 2023).

risks for the region when undertaking capacity building – such as violent extremism (both online and offline), cybersecurity risks and climate-induced security risks.

➕ Institutionalize measures and formal mechanisms to secure women's full, equal and meaningful participation at all levels of decision-making related to peace and security, introducing specific and quantifiable requirements to ensure women's direct participation and providing training, logistical and operational support for all parties involved in specific peace processes to comply with their gender-responsive obligations.

➕ Provide training and network support to women peace mediators, negotiators, peacekeepers and other women peace agents in the region for gender-responsive and inclusive peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding at the national, regional and international levels.

➕ Ensure that the national legislation adheres to international law and obligations to protect civic spaces and uphold human rights to enable effective CSO participation in the WPS agenda and protect civil society actors and activists.

➕ Set specific objectives and funding allocation for concrete actions to eradicate conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, including adopting robust legislation, exploring innovative means of reporting, documentation and data management of cases and incidents, holding accountable perpetrators, and providing quality, coordinated multi-sectoral services and support to survivors across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

➕ Continue to remove discrimination against women and girls in all their diversity in laws, policies and regulations that contribute to the substantive inequality faced by women and girls and their lack of access to justice, especially in relation to legal capacity, family, children, work and welfare.

➕ Dedicate specific investment to increasing women's representation in the justice sector and improving the capacity of justice systems (in terms of procedures and personnel capacity) to deliver gender-responsive, accessible and inclusive justice services for all, especially those who face multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination, including at times of emergencies.

➕ Align the implementation of the WPS agenda with transitional justice mechanisms. Incorporate objectives, interventions and budgets related to transforming harmful gender social norms in all actions.

➕ Monitor the implementation of the United Nations Secretary-General's pledge for at least 15 per cent of ODA allocation for gender equality and one per cent of ODA to support women's organizations.

➕ Expand the financing schemes in support of WPS implementation by institutionalizing gender budgets in relevant budget allocations for peace and security (including those dedicated for climate actions) and provide predictable, accessible and flexible funding to CSOs working on peace and security at all levels.

➕ Prioritize resources and assistance from the United Nations and other intergovernmental bodies in the region such as the ASEAN to address dire peace and security situations for women and girls in fragile States such as Afghanistan, Myanmar and other least developed countries in the region.

CHAPTER 7

Gender and the environment

Kem Oum stands in front of her solar PV panel, which the EmPower programme helped install in her Kolkorm Village, Tramkork Commune, Tramkork District of Takeo Province in Cambodia. She uses it for raising chickens and for operating water pumps to irrigate her field.
UN-Women/Ploy Phutpheng

KEY MESSAGES

In pursuit of gender-responsive environmental interventions and feminist climate justice, it is required that gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities are recognized, resources and opportunities in transition to green economies are fairly distributed, and that the leadership and agency of women and girls in driving transformative change is valued and realized.

Natural resources access and management

Despite women and girls bearing the primary responsibility for gathering natural resources to meet household needs, in many contexts, their rights and access to essentials for subsistence and livelihoods remain insecure across the Asia-Pacific region.

+ Women are significantly disadvantaged compared to men in accessing secure rights over land. In four out of the nine countries with data, the share of the male agricultural population with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land is at least twice as high as that of women.[1]

+ Women generally tend to be more food insecure than men. A gender gap exceeding 5 percentage points is observed in Southern Asia, where two in five women face moderate or severe food insecurity.[2]

+ Noticeable progress has been made in recent decades to improve women's and girls' access to safe drinking water. Yet, about 30 million women and girls in Central and Southern Asia, and Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, still drink water from unimproved sources.[3]

+ Despite years of improvement, only 3 in 20 people in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand), and 3 in 5 in Southern Asia, relied primarily on clean fuels and technology in 2021. Women often bear the brunt of restricted access to affordable and clean energy.[4]

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1   ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicators by SDG: 5.a.1 – Secure rights over agricultural land", database. Available at https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 10 March 2024).

2   United Nations SDG indicators Database, "Indicator 2.1.2, Series: Prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity", database. Available at https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal/database (accessed on 11 March 2024).

3   Central and Southern Asia and Eastern and South-Eastern Asia follow SDG regional groupings. UN-Women and United Nations DESA, Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2023 (New York, 2023).

4   United Nations SDG indicators Database, "Indicator 7.1.2, Series: Proportion of population with primary reliance on clean fuels and technology (%)", database. Available at https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal/database (accessed on 12 March 2024).

Women continue to experience marginalization in key sectors related to natural resource management.

➕ While approximately 30–40 per cent of all workers in agrifood systems are women in Asia and the Pacific, in some subregions, agrifood systems tend to be a more significant source of livelihood for women than for men. However, women in the sector are often confined to irregular, informal, part-time, low-skilled and labour-intensive work under highly unfavourable conditions.[5]

➕ Women constitute an untapped pool of talent for the water sector. They are severely underrepresented in integrated water resources management in the region. Women were formally represented or regularly consulted in policy and management processes in only 13 per cent of countries in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, 9 per cent in Central and Southern Asia, and 0 per cent in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand).[6]

➕ Two-thirds of the over 13 million jobs in the renewable energy industry are located in Asia. However, women remain largely excluded from the sector, especially in technical roles, representing about 30 per cent of the workforce worldwide.[7]

Disasters and climate change

The impacts of disasters and climate change are not gender neutral. Gender inequalities lead to varied experiences of disasters and climate change between women and men in all their diversities.

➕ Disasters do not affect women and men equally in terms of mortality, violence exposure and socioeconomic outcomes, such as health, education and economic empowerment, in many contexts.

➕ Climate factors are often associated with worsening gender-related outcomes for women and girls, such as diminished health, increased care work and domestic responsibilities, heightened risks of gender-based violence and impaired employment prospects.

Women and girls are increasingly engaged in disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate action in the Asia-Pacific region. However, their participation and leadership still fall short of achieving gender parity or attaining a critical mass to influence decision-making.

Increased efforts are needed to examine deep-rooted causes of resistance to gender-responsive and transformative policies, programmes and approaches in the environment field. Equally important is continuing to sensitize policymakers, women's groups and other stakeholders to the gender-environment nexus. This includes challenging harmful social norms and gender stereotypes that hinder the effective participation and leadership of women and girls in natural resource management, DRR and climate change mitigation and adaptation.

7.1 OVERVIEW

Gender inequality, coupled with environmental degradation and climate crises, is the most formidable sustainable development challenge in the current era.[8] Collective awareness of entrenched gender inequality and its manifestation in public policies has risen at both national and international levels. Concurrently, there has been a surge in the recognition of environmental emergencies, such as disasters, climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss. These two pressing agendas are closely interlinked and mutually reinforcing. The gender-environment nexus examines on the one hand, how women, men, girls and boys interact with and are impacted by environmental factors differently and, on the other hand, the extent to which women and girls are empowered and contribute to environmental sustainability.[9]

Women and girls often experience restricted access to natural resources and are disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation, disasters and climate change. Situations of vulnerability and risk arise from a multitude of economic and social drivers undermining the agency and resilience of women and girls and their prospects for recovery and adaptation. Examples of these

5   FAO, The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems (Rome, 2023).

6   UN-Women and United Nations DESA, Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2021 (New York, 2021).

7   International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), Renewable Energy: A Gender Perspective (Abu Dhabi, 2019).

8   United Nations, "Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes, Report of the Secretary-General", E/CN.6/2022/3 (New York, 2022).

9   OECD, Gender and the Environment: Building Evidence and Policies to Achieve the SDGs (Paris 2022).

drivers include discriminatory legal frameworks; a lack of access to inclusive infrastructure, services and technology;[10] women's concentration in the informal economy without adequate social protection; an inequitable share of unpaid care and domestic work responsibilities; widespread gender-based violence; and underrepresentation and marginalization of women and girls from national and local governance and decision-making processes. Structural gender inequalities are exacerbated in the context of environmental and climate crises.[11]

Women and girls are nonetheless powerful agents of change. Their participation and leadership in natural resource management, disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate action result in improved conservation outcomes, enhanced governance and a more equitable distribution of benefits. Women and girls, especially those from indigenous and local communities, possess expertise and traditional knowledge that support biodiversity and sustainable practices. Advocacy groups led by women and girls on environment and climate issues are catalysing change. Women and girls' involvement in climate action has led to more inclusive policies and interventions that are responsive to citizens' needs. The unique experiences, ideas and voices of women and girls are increasingly acknowledged as vital components for shaping future environment-related policies, programmes, financing allocations and international dialogue.[12]

Gender inequalities in the management of natural resources and in the safeguarding of the environment stand as a critical area of concern in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (critical area of concern K: women and the environment). Moreover, the achievement of a multiple of SDGs, such as 2, 5, 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15, will remain elusive without concerted efforts to simultaneously accelerate progress in advancing gender equality and environmental sustainability. General recommendation No.37 (2018) on gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in a changing climate, adopted by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, underscores the urgency of reinforcing the resilience of individuals and communities in the context of climate change and disasters and mitigating their adverse effects on the well-being of women and girls, based on human rights principles. Furthermore, the agreed conclusions adopted at the 66th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW66) in 2022 calls for accelerated action to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and DRR policies and programmes.

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly following the 2015 Third United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, outlines seven targets and four priorities for action to prevent new and reduce existing disaster risks. It highlights that a gender, age, disability and cultural perspective should be integrated into all DRR policies and practices.[13] The Gender Action Plan to Support Implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, launched by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) in 2024, proposes key objectives and recommended actions to promote gender equality and the empowerment and leadership of women and girls in DRR.[14] The Paris Agreement, a legally binding international treaty on climate change adopted at the 21st Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP21) in 2015, urges Parties to respect, promote and consider their respective obligations in relation to gender equality when taking action to address climate change.

The discussion in Chapter 7 centres on two crucial facets of the gender and the environment agenda: natural resource access and management, and disaster and climate risk governance. The chapter assesses the gender dimensions of access to natural resources and women's participation in key sectors related to natural resource management. It also sheds light on the gender-differentiated impacts of disasters and climate change, as well as on women's and girls' engagement in DRR and climate action. Good practice undertaken by Asia-Pacific Governments to address the gender-environment nexus is highlighted throughout the discussion.

10   IUCN, "Gender and natural resource governance: Addressing inequalities and empowering women for sustainable ecosystem management", brief (Gland, 2021).

11   UN-Women, "Report of the Expert Group, Sixty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 'Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes'", meeting report (New York, 2021).

12   OECD, "The Gender Equality and Environment Intersection: An Overview of Development Co-operation Frameworks and Financing", *OECD Development Perspectives*, No. 38 (Paris, 2023).

13   UNDRR, "What is the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction?", web page. Available at https://www.undrr.org/implementing-sendai-framework/what-sendai-framework (accessed on 27 March 2024).

14   UNDRR, UNFPA and UN-Women, *Gender Action Plan to Support Implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030* (Geneva, 2024).

7.2 NATURAL RESOURCE ACCESS AND MANAGEMENT

The Asia-Pacific region is endowed with abundant and diverse natural resources, which serve as a source of sustenance and employment for millions of people. In many contexts, women are the primary gatherers and suppliers of the natural resources which are relied on for subsistence and livelihoods. However, women's rights and access to natural resources, including their derivative products, remain tenuous. Women are largely excluded from decision-making processes related to natural resource management, with their voices, perspectives, interests and needs often neglected. Furthermore, when natural resources become contested, competed over or under pressure, women possess limited power and influence in negotiating, deciding or mediating outcomes.[15]

7.2.1 Gender dimensions of access to land, food, water, energy and other natural resources

Access to land

For rural populations, land is often the most critical household asset for facilitating agricultural production and ensuring food security and nutrition. Secure land tenure is strongly associated with heightened investment and productivity in agriculture, leading to higher incomes and economic well-being. Secure land rights for women often result in improved outcomes for them and their families, including increased bargaining power at household and community levels, enhanced child nutrition and reduced gender-based violence. However, **women are often significantly disadvantaged compared to men in accessing secure rights over land**.[16]

Among the nine Asia-Pacific countries with data on SDG indicator 5.a.1, the percentage of women with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land relative to the total agricultural female population varied significantly among countries in the region, ranging from 2.4 per cent to 82.8 per cent. In six of these countries, the figure fell below 50 per cent (Figure 7.1). For men, the percentage ranged from 29.1 per cent to 82.8 per cent, with the figure being at least twice as high as that for women in four countries. Moreover, the share of women among owners or rights-bearers of agricultural land varied between 6.6 per cent and 56.8 per cent. In five countries, men accounted for at least 60 per cent of the owners or rights-bearers of agricultural land, highlighting significant gender inequalities in land ownership and rights.[17] Furthermore, data on SDG indicator 5.a.2 suggest that only 2 out of 14 Asia-Pacific countries[18] with available information had high or very high levels of guarantees of gender equality in land ownership and/or control in the legal framework.[19]

FIGURE 7.1   Share of agricultural population with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, by sex, latest year available
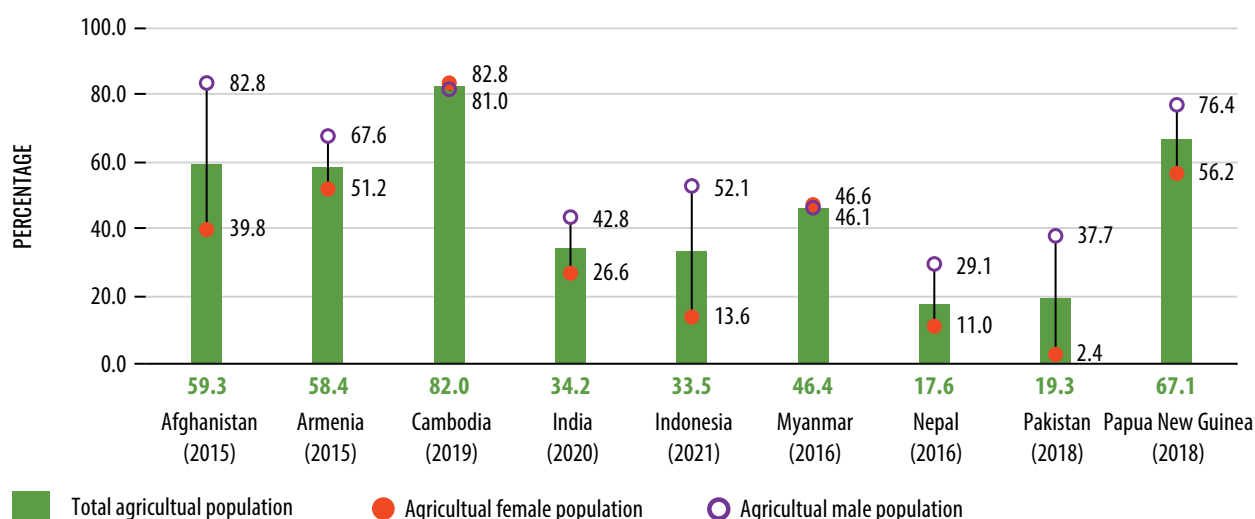
Source: ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicators by SDG: 5.a.1 – Secure rights over agricultural land", database. Available at https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 10 March 2024).

15 UN-Women, "Gender, peace and security in natural resource management: Land, forest and water management in the Asia Pacific", research brief (New York, 2022).

16 FAO, "The gender gap in land rights", brief (Rome, 2018).

17 The share of women among owners or rights-bearers of agricultural land was 36.6 per cent in Afghanistan (2015), 49.4 per cent in Armenia (2015), 54.0 per cent in Cambodia (2019), 41.3 per cent in India (2020), 19.6 per cent in Indonesia (2021), 56.8 per cent in Myanmar (2016), 39.3 per cent in Nepal (2016), 6.6 per cent in Pakistan (2018) and 38.7 per cent in Papua New Guinea (2018). ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicators by SDG: 5.a.1 – Secure rights over agricultural land", database. Available at https://data.unescap.org/ (accessed on 10 March 2024).

18 Cambodia and Georgia.

19 ESCAP SDG Gateway, "Indicator by SDG: 5.a.2- Legal framework on equal rights to land ownership", database. Available at https://data.unescap.org (accessed on 14 July 2024).

Access to food

Despite playing a pivotal role in sustainable food systems, women generally tend to be more food insecure than men. Women often assume primary responsibility for feeding their families and communities but have access to food last and least.[20] This inequality is more pronounced among poor and landless households.[21] Globally, the gender gap in food insecurity widened considerably during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, as women were more affected by job and income losses and shouldered a larger share of additional unpaid care responsibilities compared to men (see Chapter 2). In 2021, the gender gap was 3.8 percentage points, with 28.6 per cent of adult women experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity compared to 24.8 per cent of men. In 2022, the gap narrowed to 2.4 percentage points (27.8 per cent for women and 25.4 per cent for men), partially reflecting a return of women to economic activities and a weakening of the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on women's access to food.[22]

The gender gap in food insecurity was evident in Southern Asia (SDG country grouping), following the global pattern (Figure 7.2). In 2022, 42.7 per cent of women in Southern Asia faced moderate or severe food insecurity compared to 37.3 per cent of men, with the gender gap narrowing from 11.1 percentage points in 2021 to 5.4 percentage points in 2022. In Central Asia, South-Eastern Asia and Oceania, gender gaps in food insecurity have varied over the years, with differences between women and men being relatively small in 2022. Food insecurity represented a less significant concern in Eastern Asia, where women tended to be more food secure than men. In 2022, 5.6 per cent of women experienced moderate or severe food insecurity compared to 6.8 per cent of men.[23]

Access to water

Enhancing the availability, accessibility and quality of drinking water is a well-established priority for empowering women and girls, who often bear the responsibility for securing adequate water for

FIGURE 7.2 **Prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity among population aged 15 or above, by sex, 2015–2022**
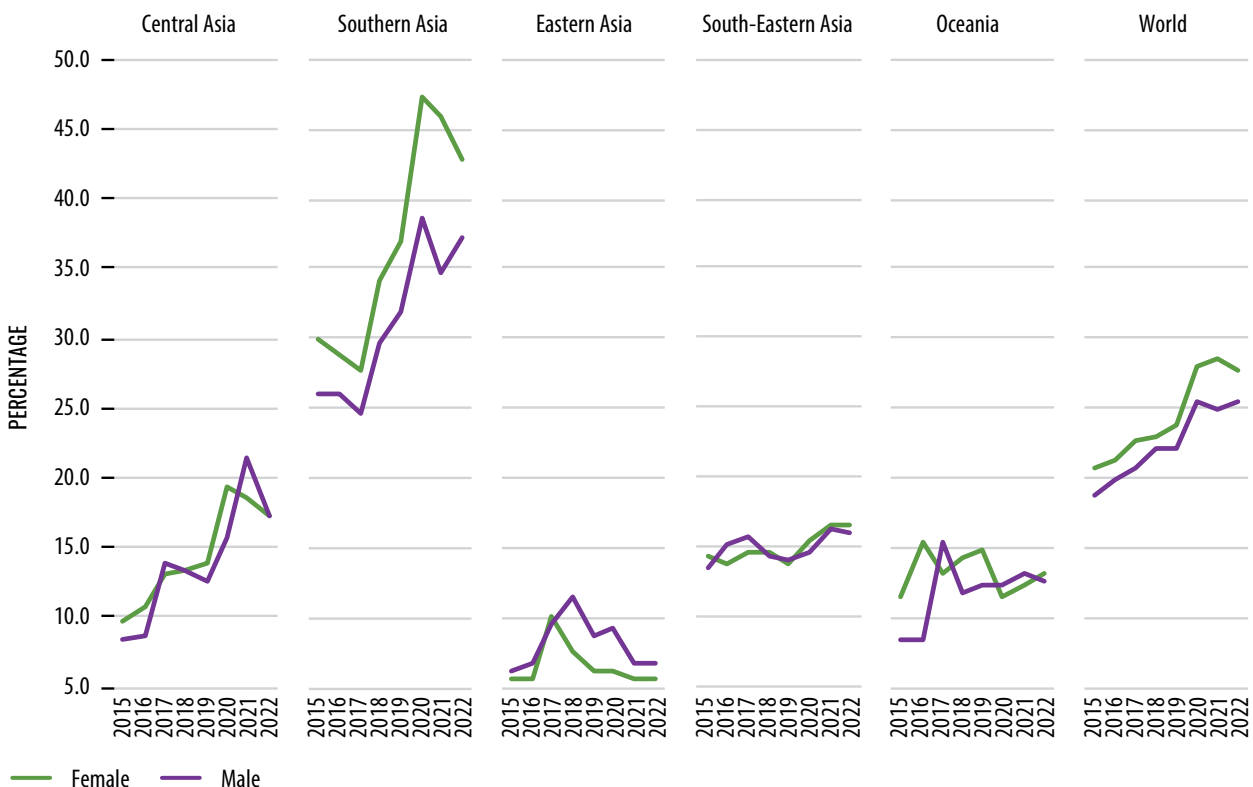
Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), "SDG Indicators Database, Indicator 2.1.2, Series: Prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity". Available at https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal/database (accessed on 11 March 2024).

20   UNEP, *Global Gender and Environment Outlook 2016* (Nairobi, 2016).

21   UN-Women, "The climate-care nexus: addressing the linkages between climate change and women's and girls' unpaid care, domestic and communal work", working paper (New York, 2023).

22   FAO and others, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023: Urbanization, Agrifood Systems Transformation and Healthy Diets across the Rural–Urban Continuum* (Rome, 2023).

23   UNDESA, "SDG Indicators Database, "Indicator 2.1.2, Series: Prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity". Available at https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal/database (accessed on 11 March 2024).

drinking, cooking, cleaning and caring for family members in households.[24] **Noticeable progress has been made in the past decades to improve women's and girls' access to safe drinking water.** In 2022, about 1.07 billion women and girls worldwide, or 27.1 per cent, lacked access to safely managed drinking water services, marking a notable decrease from 39.2 per cent in 2000. In Central and Southern Asia, the number of women and girls drinking water from unimproved sources or surface water witnessed a 71.0 per cent decrease, dropping from 107 million in 2000, 61 million in 2015 to 31 million in 2022. In Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, it declined by 84.0 per cent, from 188 million in 2000, 73 million in 2015 to 30 million in 2022. Nevertheless, water stress due to climate change, rising water demand, pollution and decades of misuse is threatening progress towards universal access to safe drinking water. Already in 2023, approximately 380 million women and girls, accounting for 9.5 per cent of the global female population, experienced high or critical water stress, with this figure projected to rise to 674 million across 33 countries by the year 2050.[25]

Collecting water from sources located off premises is a highly gendered activity. It is estimated that 16 per cent of the population globally reside in households where water is collected off-premises, including from improved and unimproved sources. In 63 per cent of these households, women and adolescent girls are primarily responsible for water carriage. Available data reveal that 24 per cent of the population in Central and Southern Asia rely on water collection, with women and adolescent girls being nearly three times as likely as men and adolescent boys to fetch water (69 per cent for women and adolescent girls and 24 per cent for men and adolescent boys). Moreover, the burden of water carriage, as measured by the average time spent collecting water, is heavier for women and girls compared to men and boys in many countries.[26]

Water collection activities and inadequate access to sanitation facilities increases women's and girls' risk of gender-based violence, as they access isolated water collection points and seek privacy for accessing sanitation facilities.[27] Reducing the time spent on water collection is important for increasing school attendance and enhancing learning outcomes among girls. Among adult women, improving access to water can free up time and open a broader array of employment opportunities, contributing to the achievement of decent work and poverty eradication.[28]

Access to energy

Access to affordable and clean energy for all is essential for promoting sustainable food production and consumption, creating decent jobs and increasing incomes, tackling climate change and addressing other major development challenges.[29] Traditional gender roles and societal norms often dictate that women and girls shoulder the majority of unpaid care and domestic work, leading them to spend more time at home compared to men. **Consequently, women are often the primary users of household energy and rely heavily on it to fulfil their daily tasks. This dependence on energy exposes women and girls to high health risks associated with the use of polluting fuels and technologies indoors.**[30] For example, women and girls often face higher exposure to household air pollution due to traditional domestic roles, such as cooking with biomass fuels, which can result in severe respiratory illnesses and other health issues.[31]

Globally, 8.6 per cent of the population lacked access to electricity in 2021. Despite remarkable progress towards universal coverage in Asia and the Pacific over the past few years, a staggering 61.7 per cent of the population in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) still did not have access to electricity in 2021 (Figure 7.3). In some subregions, regardless of years of improvement, access to clean fuels and technology remained out of reach for many people. Only 15.0 per cent of the population in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) and 64.0 per cent in Southern Asia primarily relied on clean fuels and technology, both figures falling below the world average of 71.0 per cent in 2021.[32] As women often bear the brunt of restricted access to affordable and clean energy, further energy interventions must consider their needs and priorities. By doing so, these efforts will further help alleviate household and community energy poverty.[33]

24   UNICEF and WHO, *Progress on Household Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene 2000–2022: Special Focus on Gender* (New York, 2023).

25   UN-Women and United Nations DESA, *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2023* (New York, 2023).

26   UNICEF and WHO, *Progress on Household Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene 2000–2022: Special Focus on Gender* (New York, 2023) and UN-Women, "Women and the environment: An Asia-Pacific snapshot", brief (New York, 2022).

27   UN-Women, UN-Water, and the United Nations, *From Commodity to Common Good: A Feminist Agenda to Tackle the World's Water Crisis* (New York, 2023).

28   UN-Women, *Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda: Gender-Responsive Water and Sanitation Systems* (New York, 2018).

29   UN-Women and UNIDO, *Gender Equality in the Sustainable Energy Transition* (New York and Vienna, 2023).

30   WHO, "Household air pollution", web page. Available at https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/household-air-pollution-and-health (accessed on 9 April 2024).

31   Stockholm Development Institute, *Applying a data-driven gender lens to air pollution policies in the ASEAN region* (Stockholm, 2023).

32   UNDESA, "SDG Indicators Database, "Indicator 7.1.1, Series: Proportion of population with access to electricity, by urban/rural (%)" and "SDG Indicator 7.1.2, Series: Proportion of population with primary reliance on clean fuels and technology (%)". Available at https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal/database (accessed on 12 March 2024).

33   UN-Women and UNIDO, *Gender Equality in the Sustainable Energy Transition* (New York and Vienna, 2023).

FIGURE 7.3 **Proportion of population with access to electricity and clean fuels and technology, 2015–2021**

ACCESS TO ELECTRICITY

PRIMARY RELIANCE ON CLEAN FUELS AND TECHNOLOGY

Central Asia   Southern Asia   Eastern Asia   South-Eastern Asia   Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand)   World
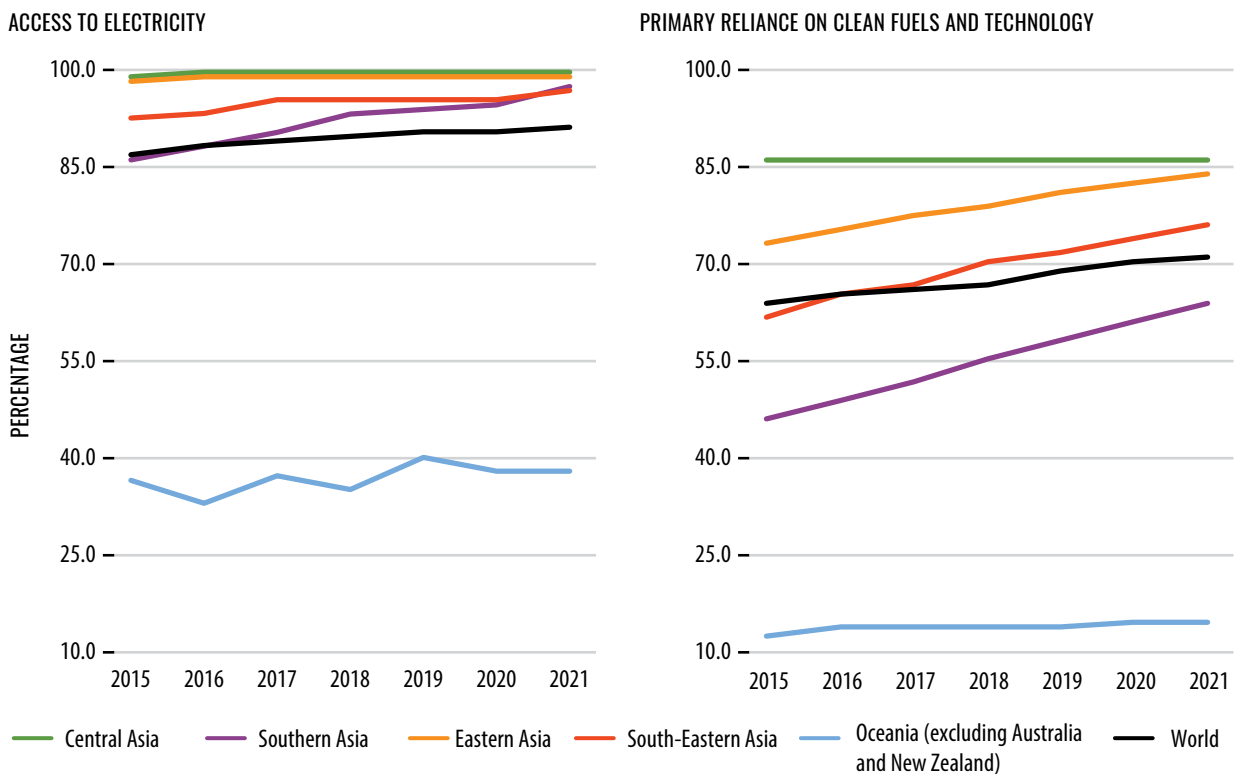
Source: United Nations SDG indicators Database, "Indicator 7.1.1, Series: Proportion of population with access to electricity, by urban/rural (%)" and "Indicator 7.1.2, Series: Proportion of population with primary reliance on clean fuels and technology (%)", database. Available at https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal/database (accessed on 12 March 2024). One hundred per cent of the population had access to electricity and more than 95 per cent primarily relied on clean fuels and technology in Australia and New Zealand in the period 2015–2021.

Gender inequality also manifests itself in the unequal access to other natural resources. For example, across many parts of the Asia-Pacific region, rural women lack direct control over forest land and their resources, while men exercise control and authority over high-value tree products. Women are particularly susceptible to the increasing encroachment and commercialization of forest areas, which affect women's food security, livelihoods and income-generating opportunities.[34] Women lack access and control over coastal and marine ecosystem resources. As climate change, pollution and globalization exert growing pressures on coastal and marine ecosystems, men and women experience these impacts differently due to their distinct roles, knowledge and needs. Yet women's contributions in fisheries, waste management and conservation have historically been overlooked in research, management and policy.[35] Addressing the gender dimensions of access to natural resources, including their derivative products, is imperative to empower women and girls and achieving gender equality.

Improving access to natural resources for women and girls

Closing gender gaps in women's access to natural resources needs a comprehensive approach that protects their rights and enhances their agency through capacity development, community collective action and service provision. Some countries have developed policies and undertaken reforms to support women's land titling and registration, as well as their access to other natural resources.

Despite significant room for improvement, the Land Titling Project II (2004–09) in **Lao People's Democratic Republic** was designed to ensure women's customary land rights are reflected in the new official land registration systems, promote women's employment in land institutions at all levels, and expand women's access to specialized technical tertiary education. Under the project, 37.5 per cent of titles were issued to women compared to 23.4 per cent to men, and 29.3 per cent were registered jointly.[36] The Ministry of

34   UN-Women, "Gender, peace and security in natural resource management: Land, forest and water management in the Asia Pacific", research brief (New York, 2022).
35   UNEP and Gender and Water Alliance. *Gender Mainstreaming in Coastal and Marine Ecosystems Management: Principles, Case Studies and Lessons Learned* (Nairobi, 2022).
36   World Bank, "Examples from East Asia on strengthening women's land rights", Agriculture and Environmental Services Department notes (Washington. D.C., 2014).

Natural Resources and Environment is running a new project from 2021 to 2026 to improve tenure security and land administration services, with targeted awareness campaigns for women and training for government officials on women's land rights and relevant registration procedures.[37]

In **Indonesia,** the Ministry of Environment and Forestry strengthened equal access for men and women to manage social forestry by enacting Regulation No. 9/2021 on Social Forestry Management. The Regulation has changed the social forestry permit holder requirement from the head of a family (mostly a man) to anyone who lives in the area around the forest. The percentage of women receivers rose from 15 per cent in 2022 to 18 per cent in 2023.[38] In **Nepal**, agricultural and forestry policies that specifically promote inclusive and gender-balanced farmland ownership and forest management have been introduced, although implementation and monitoring remain weak.[39]

Several initiatives in the region have effectively improved women's access to natural resources. Under the Coastal Community Development project (2013– 2017) in **Indonesia**, formal fishers' groups were formed and equipped with improved fishing tools. Women's groups were established for business enterprises to process, transform and sell fish products. These groups received financial support and technical training and were directly connected to markets. As a result, there was a 27 per cent increase in women's participation in fish and marine processing and an 84 per cent increase in their general participation in community groups. Household-level income rose by 33 per cent, while sales of fish and marine products saw a boost of 28 per cent.[40] The Nuku'alofa Urban Development Sector Project (2011–2020) in **Tonga** benefitted women by improving water distribution and solid waste collection. A series of community and media campaigns on water safety, conservation and hygiene were organized, covering all women's groups in Nuku'alofa.[41]

7.2.2 Women's participation in key sectors related to natural resource management

Women's contribution to natural resource management is enabled by their effective participation in sectors, such as agriculture, forestry, fisheries, water and energy. Raising women's wages, optimizing their working conditions and breaking down barriers to their decision-making and leadership in business operations can empower women to sustain livelihoods while actively contributing to the sustainable management of natural resources.[42] This sub-section highlights women's participation in three crucial domains, namely, agrifood systems, the water sector and the renewable energy industry.

Agrifood systems

Agrifood systems encompass an entire range of actors and their interconnected value-adding activities in food and non-food agricultural production, as well as associated off-farm activities, such as food storage, aggregation, post-harvest handling, transportation, processing, distribution, marketing, disposal and consumption.[43] It has been increasingly recognized that the world must accelerate actions to transform to more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems for "better production, better nutrition, a better environment, and a better life."[44] Agrifood systems yield considerable benefits to society. They represent a major employer worldwide, providing jobs and livelihoods for more than a billion people. Many farmers offer environmental services to society as environmental stewards. Through sustainable practices, agrifood systems generate public goods such as biodiversity conservation, carbon storage and sequestration and watershed regulation. On the other hand, some agrifood systems are fragile and unsustainable due to market, policy and institutional failures, contributing to climate change and environmental degradation.[45]

37 World Bank, "World Bank to support land administration, titling in Lao PDR", press release, 4 September 2021. Available at https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/09/04/world-bank-to-support-land-administration-titling-in-lao-pdr (accessed on 31 March 2024) and World Bank, "Enhancing Systematic Land Registration Project", project document (Washington, D.C., 2021).

38 Indonesia, The Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection, *National Report on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (Jakarta, 2024).

39 UN-Women, "Gender, peace and security in natural resource management: Land, forest and water management in the Asia Pacific", research brief (New York, 2022).

40 FAO, *The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems* (Rome, 2023) and International Fund for Agriculture Development, *Impact Assessment Report: Republic of Indonesia Coastal Community Development Project (CCDP)* (Rome, 2019).

41 ADB, "Pathway to empowerment: Women's decision-making and access to water in the Pacific", blog, 23 October 2020. Available at https://blogs.adb.org/blog/pathway-empowerment-women-s-decision-making-and-access-water-pacific (accessed on 31 March 2024) and ADB, "Tonga: Nuku'alofa Urban Development Sector Project", completion report (Manila, 2021).

42 UN-Women, "Women and the environment: An Asia-Pacific snapshot", brief (New York, 2022).

43 FAO, *The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems* (Rome, 2023).

44 FAO, "Strategic framework 2022–31", framework (Rome, 2021).

45 FAO, *The State of Food and Agriculture 2023: Revealing the True Cost of Food to Transform Agrifood Systems* (Rome, 2023).

FIGURE 7.4 **Share of agrifood-system employment in total employment in 2005 and 2019, by sex**
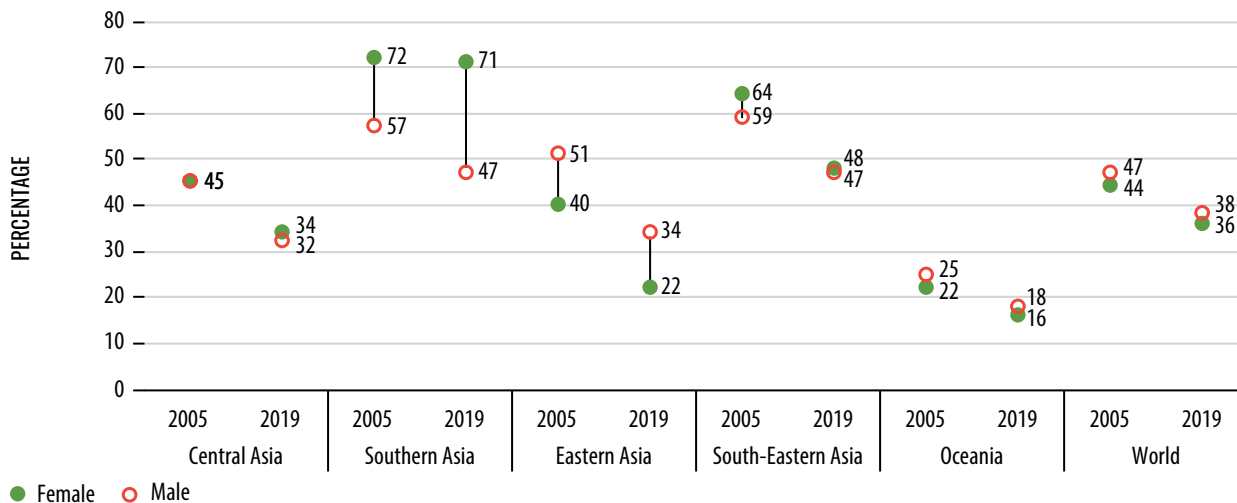
Source: FAO, *The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems* (Rome, 2023).

Globally, the share of working women and men in agrifood systems witnessed a decline of nearly 10 percentage points between 2005 and 2019, driven by a reduction in primary agricultural production employment (Figure 7.4). In 2019, 36 per cent of working women were employed in agrifood systems, down from 44 per cent in 2005. The decline in women's employment in agrifood systems was evident in all subregions in Asia and the Pacific except for Southern Asia. India had a pivotal influence on this trend. While only about one in five women were working or looking for a job in the country, labour force participation remained relatively high among the poorest women, and agriculture was a major source of employment.[46]

While approximately 30–40 per cent of all workers in agrifood systems are women in Asia and the Pacific,[47] in some subregions, agrifood systems are a more significant source of livelihood for women than for men. In Southern Asia, an overwhelming 71 per cent of female workers were engaged in agrifood systems in 2019, compared to 47 per cent of male workers. The share of agrifood-system employment slightly higher among women than among men in Central Asia (34 per cent of working women versus 32 per cent of working men) and South-Eastern Asia (48 per cent of working women versus 47 per cent of working men).[48] It is clear that agrifood systems hold significant potential to foster gender equality and women's empowerment, as well as to accelerate progress towards multiple development goals of the 2030 Agenda.

Despite the significance of agrifood systems for women's livelihoods and their families' well-being, women are often confined to irregular, informal, part-time, low-skilled and labour-intensive work under highly unfavourable conditions. Temporary and informal work reduces women's power and makes them more vulnerable to violence, including economic, psychological, physical and sexual abuse and sexual harassment.[49] Available data from across the world suggest that, on average, women working in agriculture in remunerated employment earn 18.4 per cent less than men. The gender gap in land productivity between female- and male-managed farms of the same size stands at 24 per cent. Moreover, the roles of women in off-farm work are likely to be in less-profitable activities or on worse terms than those of men due to discriminatory social norms and restricted access to assets and resources.

To strengthen women's participation in agrifood systems, actions are needed to increase their access to key resources, such as land, water, technology, services and finance, education and training, and networks. It is also urgent to improve women's involvement in intrahousehold decision-making regarding the use of land and income. According to FAO estimates, closing the gender gaps in farm productivity and wages in agrifood systems would increase global GDP by at least 1 per cent or nearly $1 trillion. It would also reduce global food insecurity by at least 2 percentage points, contributing to a decrease in the number of food-insecure people by 45 million.[50]

46　FAO, *The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems* (Rome, 2023).
47　The share of female agrifood-system workers was 44 per cent in Central Asia, 31 per cent in Southern Asia, 35 per cent in Eastern Asia, 43 per cent in South-Eastern Asia, 44 per cent in Oceania and 38 per cent worldwide in 2019. In several countries in South-Eastern Asia, including Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Viet Nam, women represented nearly half of the labour force in agriculture.
48　FAO, *The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems* (Rome, 2023).
49　FAO, *The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems* (Rome, 2023).
50　Ibid.

Some Governments have made strides in advancing women's participation in agrifood systems. Access to education and training is critical for women's empowerment. Interventions that tackle discriminatory gender norms and attitudes, address care and unpaid work, increase women's access to technology and resources, and enhance their land tenure security often result in improved productivity.[51]

The Agriculture, Nutrition, and Gender Linkages project (2015–2018) implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture in **Bangladesh** provided agricultural training, nutrition behavioural change communication and gender sensitization training to women and men. The project significantly elevated women's empowerment score and status[52] and fostered small improvements in the gender attitudes of both women and men.[53] In **Cambodia**, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and the Ministry of Women's Affairs collaborated in the roll-out of an initiative aimed at empowering both women and men who were small-scale producers in agribusiness. The initiative focused on creating profitable agricultural enterprises while facilitating positive changes in gender relations within households, communities and markets.[54]

The Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women project (2014-2018) in **Kyrgyzstan** led to rural women's increased income, better livelihoods and food security from enhanced agricultural productivity. Factors that contributed to these results included the promotion of solidarity economic models, such as self-help groups and group economic initiatives, alongside facilitating access to training and interest-free commodity and cash loans. The project involved the implementation the Gender Action Learning System (GALS), a participatory, community-led empowerment methodology that can be adapted to various cultural and organizational contexts. GALS tools assisted in transforming gendered power relations, promoting women's and men's self-confidence and improving livelihoods.[55]

In **Papua New Guinea**, within the framework of the National Food Security Policy 2018-2027, the Department of Agriculture and Livestock acknowledges the potential of natural resource management to empower women through increased control over resources, knowledge and social standing. Among the strategies to harness this potential, the policy prioritizes women as targets of extension services through strengthened rural resource centres. It promotes sustainable income-generating opportunities to contribute to improving access to nutritious food for children and families. Additionally, the Policy calls for support and collaboration with women's organizations like the Papua New Guinea Women in Agriculture Development Foundation, while involving men in supporting women's participation in decision-making related to agriculture, agribusiness and household nutrition.[56]

Given the increasing incidence of climate change-related events, it is crucial for agricultural development to be climate-smart and to take a gender-responsive approach that understands the factors affecting women farmers' adaptive capacity. This approach addresses gender-based inequalities by improving women's access to resources, services, information, and training for climate-smart agriculture. It enables women to enhance their productivity, livelihoods and climate resilience.[57] In **Bhutan**, between 2019 and 2021, 952 women farmers received training in organic farming, vegetable and fruit tree cultivation and land management to support climate-resilient agriculture, in line with the Bhutan's Economic Development Policy 2016. The policy prioritizes organic farming, biotechnology and agro-processing and promotes climate-smart agriculture practices. The initiative "Supporting Climate Resilience and Transformational Change in the Agriculture Sector in Bhutan" has facilitated a shift towards climate-informed agriculture practices across eight Dzongkhags (districts), equipping farmers, including women farmers, with skills to build resilience to climate change.[58]

51   FAO, *The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems* (Rome, 2023).

52   Empowerment was measured using the internationally validated project-level Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (pro-WEAI), including 12 indicators to assess intrinsic agency, instrumental agency and collective agency.

53   Agnes Quisumbing and others, "Designing for empowerment impact in agricultural development projects: Experimental evidence from the Agriculture, Nutrition, and Gender Linkages (ANGeL) project in Bangladesh", *World Development*, vol. 146 (October 2021).

54   Inputs from an FAO participant of the ESCAP Expert Group Meeting on Asia-Pacific Beijing+30 Regional Synthesis Report. For more information, please see Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Women's Affairs, "Cambodia National Report on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)" Available at https://www.asiapacificgender.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Cambodia%27s%20National%20Review%20for%20Implementation%20of%20the%20Beijing%20Platform%20for%20Action%20%282024%29.pdf (accessed on 15 July 2024).

55   Natalia Kosheleva and Elmira Kerimalieva, "Final evaluation of the Kyrgyzstan Joint UN-Women/ FAO/ IFAD/ WFP Programme on Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women", final report (n.p., 2018) and FAO, IFAD and WFP, *Good Practice: Joint Programme to Accelerate Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women* (Rome, 2020). The project was also implemented in Nepal.

56   Papua New Guinea, Department of Agriculture and Livestock, *Papua New Guinea National Food Security Policy 2018-2027: Growing agriculture for food security, good nutrition and health* (Port Moresby, 2018).

57   FAO, "Climate Smart Agriculture Sourcebook: The role of gender in Climate-Smart Agriculture. C6 – Overview", web page. Available at https://www.fao.org/climate-smart-agriculture-sourcebook/enabling-frameworks/module-c6-gender/c6-overview/en/ (accessed on 7 August 2024).

58   Bhutan, The National Commission for Women and Children, *National Report on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (Thimphu, 2024).

In **Kyrgyzstan**, 62 per cent of the population live in rural areas, and they depend heavily on crop and livestock production, with agriculture as the major source of employment.[59] In 2023, the Ministry of Agriculture introduced a National Action Plan for the Development of Family Farming. One of the key priorities of the National Action Plan was to promote gender equality in family farming and empower rural women to take on leadership roles in agriculture. The plan included the future organization of national and district-level competitions to award the "Best Women Farmer" prize. The Ministry aimed to promote the development of essential social infrastructure, such as clean water and sanitation, kindergartens, schools and rural medical facilities. The objective was to free up women's time and allow them to participate in training in agricultural production skills for sustainable and climate-resilient farming. Additionally, the National Action Plan emphasizes the need for climate-smart agriculture and green farming approaches, which would be supported through the development of training programmes, information materials, and capacity building initiatives.[60]

Water sector

Sustainable water resources management is essential for water ecosystem preservation, food and energy production, decent work and economic growth generation, and climate change mitigation.[61] Increasing women's participation in water utilities, as well as water supply and irrigation community governance groups, often catalyses advancements in water infrastructure, security and sanitation. However, a confluence of factors, such as the scarcity of female water professionals, entrenched social norms and gender stereotypes, and misperceptions about women's managerial and technical competencies, perpetuates the marginalization of women in the water sector.[62]

Women represent an untapped pool of talent for the water sector. Findings of the World Bank Utility Survey 2018–19 showed that, among the 64 water and sanitation service providers in 28 economies around the world, women accounted for only 17.7 per cent of the workforce. While 22.8 per cent of engineers and 23.3 per cent of managers were women, 32 per cent of the surveyed utilities had no female engineers and

12 per cent operated without any female managers. Women encounter barriers to employment in the water sector throughout their career cycle, including in relation to attraction, recruitment, retention and advancement.[63]

In Asia and the Pacific, women are severely underrepresented in integrated water resources management, which promotes "the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources to maximize economic and social welfare in an equitable manner."[64] According to the UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water Survey, 2018/2019, only 22 per cent of 104 countries reported high levels of female participation in integrated water resources management, where women were formally represented or regularly consulted in policy and management processes. The percentage of countries with high levels of women's participation was alarmingly low in almost all Asia-Pacific subregions, standing at 13 per cent in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, 9 per cent in Central and Southern Asia, and 0 per cent in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand).[65] Closing the gender gap in water decision-making at national and local levels plays a crucial role in increasing the efficiency and sustainability of water management processes.[66]

Advancing women's participation and leadership in the water sector often entails increasing gender diversity in the water workforce and establishing supportive frameworks for gender parity in water resources management. For example, the Urban Services Improvement Investment Program — Tranche 1 (2010–2021) in **Georgia** increased women's participation in water supply and sanitation management and service delivery by creating employment and career development opportunities. At the end of the project, women represented more than 30 per cent of key management positions in the United Water Supply Company of Georgia (UWSCG) and over 40 per cent of employees in 9 UWSCG service centres at project locations.[67] In **the Philippines**, the Magna Carta of Women 2019 requires 40 per cent participation of women in Development Councils, which are responsible for planning water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and integrated water resources management. In **Vanuatu**, the amended

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59 International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), "Kyrgyzstan.", web page. Available at https://www.ifad.org/en/web/operations/w/country/kyrgyzstan (accessed on 4 June 2024).

60 Kyrgyzstan, Ministry of Agriculture, *National Action Plan for the Development of Family Farming in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2023-2028*(Bishkek, 2022).

61 UNESCO and UN-Water, *The United Nations World Water Development Report 2020: Water and Climate Change* (Paris, 2020).

62 ADB, "Women, water and leadership", *ADB briefs* No. 24 (Manila, 2014).

63 World Bank, *Women in Water Utilities: Breaking Barriers* (Washington, D.C., 2019).

64 UNEP, "Water resources management", web page. Available at https://www.unep.org/topics/fresh-water/water-resources-management (accessed on 14 March 2024).

65 At least 50 per cent of countries and/or 66 per cent of population were covered in each subregion. UN-Women and United Nations DESA, *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2021* (New York, 2021).

66 ADB, "Women, water and leadership", *ADB briefs* No. 24 (Manila, 2014).

67 ADB, "Georgia: Urban Services Improvement Investment Program – Tranche 1", completion report (Manila, 2022).

Water Resources Management Act (2016) mandates 40 per cent representation of women in all rural water committees, and this is implemented through the registration of these committees.[68]

Renewable energy industry

The advancement of the renewable energy industry contributes to reducing global carbon dioxide emissions and fostering new employment opportunities. The transition from fossil fuels to renewables facilitates a shift towards economic growth compatible with climate stability. Globally, renewable energy employment has continued to expand in recent years. In 2022, the sector provided an estimated 13.7 million jobs, up from 12.7 million in 2021, with significant contributions from fields such as solar photovoltaic (4.9 million), hydropower (2.5 million), biofuels (2.5 million) and wind power (1.4 million). Approximately two-thirds of all jobs were located in Asia.[69] The full potential of a just energy transition can be realized when the equality of opportunity and treatment of women and men is set up as a specific focus and goal from the outset.[70]

Women remain largely excluded from the renewable energy industry, especially in technical roles.[71] An online survey conducted by the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) in 2018, covering more than 140 countries, revealed that women constituted 32 per cent of the full-time employees of responding organizations in the renewable energy sector. Administrative positions saw a higher representation of women at 45 per cent, compared to STEM jobs at 28 per cent and non-STEM technical roles at 35 per cent. Perceptions of gender roles, cultural and social norms, and prevailing hiring practices were listed by survey respondents as top barriers to entry for women in the modern renewable energy sector. Meanwhile, the glass ceiling – invisible barriers restricting women from rising to influential positions despite their qualifications – cultural and social norms, lack of flexibility in the workplace, and insufficient mentorship opportunities were reported as significant obstacles to women's career advancement.[72] These findings suggest that a gender-responsive just transition in the energy sector must tackle structural gender inequalities and unleash women's potential as agents of change in all job opportunities along the value chain.

Building a gender-responsive renewable energy industry necessitates investment in, for example, evidence-based policy advocacy, gender diversity in the workforce and women's energy entrepreneurship, and decentralized sustainable energy technologies that support gender equality and women's economic empowerment.[73] **Nauru** developed national capacity to operate and maintain solar photovoltaic and battery storage systems, with a particular focus on increasing women's representation in the Nauru Utilities Corporation.[74] Similarly, the **Vietnam** Electricity Corporation (EVN), established by the Government, issued policies to recruit qualified women at every level of the workforce. The company set up a "women in leadership" programme and delivered gender equality training to senior executives. The share of women at the director level increased from 0 to 10 per cent.

In the state of Madhya Pradesh in **India**, the Solar Powering Anganwadi Centres pilot project (concluded in 2019) decentralized renewable energy to institutions run and managed by women that were not connected to the grid. The project enabled access to clean energy for 63 centres, providing avenues for lighting, cooling and mobile charging facilities. A cadre of female centre workers was trained in the management and maintenance of installed solar systems. The pilot led to the installation of solar systems in 2,500 remote Anganwadi centres in Madhya Pradesh.[75]

In the **Marshall Islands**, a training initiative was implemented targeting young women residing in rural areas with a high school education. The objective was to develop their skills in electrical and mechanical assembly, as well as the commissioning of solar photovoltaic systems. These were male-dominated areas of work in the Marshall Islands. The participants supervised the installation of solar photovoltaic refrigerators in their own homes.[76]

At the subregional level, **ASEAN** recognizes the potential of increasing women's employment in renewable energy to enhance industry robustness and societal welfare. To address challenges such as data insufficiency and male-dominated norms, ASEAN advocates adopting gender-responsive renewable energy policies and continuous development of gender-inclusive strategies supported by partnerships among member states and stakeholders.[77]

68   Global Water Partnership and UNEP-DHI, *Advancing towards Gender Mainstreaming in Water Resources Management* (Stockholm, 2021).

69   IRENA and ILO, *Renewable Energy and Jobs: Annual Review 2023* (Abu Dhabi and Geneva, 2023).

70   UN-Women and UNIDO, *Gender Equality in the Sustainable Energy Transition* (New York and Vienna, 2023).

71   For more information on women's underrepresentation in certain industries see chapter 3.

72   IRENA, *Renewable Energy: A Gender Perspective* (Abu Dhabi, 2019).

73   ENERGIA, World Bank and UN-Women, "Global progress of SDG 7 – Energy and Gender", Accelerating SDG 7 achievement policy brief 12, (New York, 2018).

74   Government of Nauru, *Updated Nationally Determined Contribution* (Yaren, 2021).

75   UN-Women and UNIDO, *Gender Equality in the Sustainable Energy Transition* (New York and Vienna, 2023).

76   Marshall Islands (the), Ministry of Culture and Internal Affairs, *National Report on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (Majuro, 2024).

77   ASEAN Centre for Energy, *Gender Equality in ASEAN Energy Booklet* (n.p., 2024).

BOX 7.1   Gender, peace and security and natural resource management

In the Asia-Pacific, the dependency on natural resources for livelihoods, combined with increasing pressures from exploitation and climate change, has heightened security risks at multiple levels — from individual to societal. The region has witnessed 23 significant conflicts linked to resources since the 1950s, nearly half have occurred in Indonesia, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines.[1] More recently, there has been a notable recent increase in resource-based conflicts in the region.[2] In Bangladesh, deforestation and extreme weather have increased landslide and flooding risks, leading to displacement and heightened conflict risks over resource competition.[3] This deterioration in security affects women disproportionately, as they are often the primary managers of natural resources but are excluded from decision-making processes. Their involvement is crucial not only for managing resources sustainably but also for maintaining peace and security in resource-dependent communities.

To address the multifaceted security risks associated with natural resource depletion and escalating conflicts, it is crucial to fully integrate women into all levels of natural resource management. This integration should span from grassroots community involvements to high-level policy formulation and strategic decision-making. For example, in contexts where women and indigenous women are predominantly engaged in managing forests, land and water, their proportional representation in decision-making processes is essential.

Substantive reforms in land tenure systems and broader policy frameworks are necessary to tackle the root causes of gender inequality and resource-related conflicts effectively. These reforms should aim to elevate women's participation and leadership within natural resource management, thereby acknowledging their rights and significant contributions. Such strategic involvement is fundamental to fostering resilient communities and preventing conflicts, thus contributing to sustainable peace and security across the region.

For example, **Indonesia** adopted its National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security for the period 2020-2025 in July 2021. The National Action Plan addresses non-traditional security issues such as climate change, violent extremism and land disputes. It emphasizes prevention, mitigation and the empowerment and participation of women and children in addressing emerging security threats, including those posed by climate change. One of the key focus areas of the National Action Plan is natural resource access and ownership, which can be impacted by climate change.[4]

1   UN Women, "Extractive industries, gender, and conflict in Asia Pacific", programme brief (New York, 2020).
2   Idris Iffat, "Trends in Conflict and Stability in the Indo-Pacific", K4D Emerging Issues Report 42, Institute of Development Studies, January 2020.
3   Adam Day and Jessica Caus, "Conflict Prevention in an Era of Climate Change: Adapting the UN to Climate-Security Risks", United Nations University (March 2020).
4   UN Women, *Country Brief: Women, Peace and Security in Indonesia* (Bangkok, 2023).

BOX 7.2   Engaging and empowering women from ethnic minorities in natural resource management in China and Viet Nam

Indigenous women and women from ethnic minorities play an important role in managing national resources. In **China**, in the Liguang Villages' community conserved areas, women from the predominant Lisu ethnic minority group have been empowered to take on greater roles in resource management. Each village within conserved areas has elected a woman representative, further enhancing women's participation in managing and safeguarding natural resources.[1] In the province of Lao Cai, **Viet Nam**, ethnic minority women have the opportunity to leverage their traditional knowledge, protecting and managing the natural resources of the area and participating in sustainable development. Through the "Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (REDD+)" Programme, public-private partnerships are being piloted between the provincial government, ethnic minority communities and businesses, focusing on traditional medicines. About 90 per cent of the active ingredients of traditional medicines come from forests. Indigenous women sustainably manage and harvest forests according to their knowledge.[2]

1   UNDP Nature Exposure, "Women. Tradition. Culture. - UNDP Nature", web page. Available at https://undp-nature.exposure.co/women-tradition-culture (accessed on 29 May 2024).
2   UNDP, "Viet Nam: Unlocking the entrepreneurial power of indigenous women to protect forests", blog, 13 December 2019. Available at https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/stories/viet-nam-unlocking-entrepreneurial-power-indigenous-women-protect-forests (accessed on 7 August 2024).

DISASTERS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The impacts of disasters and climate change are not gender neutral. Gender inequalities lead to varied experiences of disasters and climate change between women, men, girls and boys in all their diversities. The gender-differentiated impacts can exacerbate existing inequalities, thereby further affecting women and girls' future resilience to shocks and crises.[78] While women and girls are actively contributing to DRR and climate action, their participation and leadership have yet to achieve gender parity or a critical mass to adequately influence decisions and policies.[79] In pursuit of gender-responsive DRR and feminist climate justice, it is required that gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities are recognized, resources and opportunities in transition to green economies are fairly distributed, and above all, that the leadership and agency of women and girls in driving transformative change are valued and realized.[80]

7.3.1 Gender-differentiated impacts of disasters and climate change

Disasters

Asia and the Pacific remains the most disaster-prone region in the world. In 2022, over 140 disasters occurred, including floods, earthquakes, tropical cyclones, heatwaves, droughts and others. These disaster events affected more than 64 million people, caused over 7,500 deaths and resulted in economic losses estimated in the value of over $57 billion.[81] **Disasters, whether caused by geophysical, hydrological, meteorological, climatological or biological hazards,[82] do not affect women and men equally in terms of mortality and socioeconomic outcomes.**[83]

Despite years of capacity-building and data collection efforts, the Asia-Pacific region still has limited sex-disaggregated data on Sendai Framework Monitoring Targets A and B related to **disaster mortality and affected populations.**[84] As of March 2024, 18 ESCAP member States reported sex-disaggregated disaster-related mortality data (Target A) in the Sendai Framework Monitor. Fifteen ESCAP member States have also provided sex-disaggregated disaster affected population data (Target B). Women accounted for 47 per cent of disaster-related mortalities and 55 per cent of the total disaster affected population, among countries with available data in Asia and the Pacific.[85]

Regarding **health outcomes**, boys tend to be more vulnerable to nutritional and physical stress in utero or during early life than girls owing to biological factors. However, the preference for treating boys with health problems can result in girls being worse off when their families encounter scarcity due to disasters. Damaged health facilities disrupted infrastructure and diminished economic resources can interrupt women's and girls' access to modern contraception, family planning, hygiene products and maternal care. Moreover, studies consistently suggest that women are more susceptible to depression, anxiety and stress-related disorders after disasters, although suicide rates tend to be higher among men.[86] In Tonga, for instance, as many as 92 per cent of women and 85 per cent of men who were exposed to disasters and related hazards experienced mental health issues.[87]

The impacts of disasters on **school enrolment** vary for girls and boys. Whether girls or boys are withdrawn from school and engage in child labour depends on the needs of parents and the value they attribute to children's education. When parents are unable to afford tuition or require additional support at home, girls usually experience a more significant decrease in school enrolment compared to boys. On the other hand, when families need extra income and labour, boys are typically impacted to a greater extent than girls.[88]

78   World Bank, *Gender Dimensions of Disaster Risk and Resilience: Existing Evidence* (Washington, D.C., 2021).

79   United Nations, "Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes, Report of the Secretary-General", E/CN.6/2022/3 (New York, 2022).

80   UN-Women, *Feminist Climate Justice: A Framework for Action* (New York, 2023).

81   ESCAP, *Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2023: Seizing the Moment: Targeting Transformative Disaster Risk Resilience* (United Nations publication, 2023).

82   World Bank, *Gender Dimensions of Disaster Risk and Resilience: Existing Evidence* (Washington, D.C., 2021).

83   UN-Women, UNFPA and UNDRR, *Beyond Vulnerabilities to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment and Leadership in Disaster Risk Reduction: Critical Actions for the United Nations System,* United Nations Joint Study on the Status of Gender Equality and Women's Leadership in DRR (New York and Geneva, 2021) and Eric Neumayer and Thomas Plumper, "The Gendered Nature of Natural Disasters: The Impact of Catastrophic Events on the Gender Gap in Life Expectancy 1981-2002," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, vol. 97, No. 3 (February, 2007).

84   Global target A: Substantially reduce global disaster mortality by 2030, aiming to lower average per 100,000 global mortalities between 2020-2030 compared with 2005-2015. Global target B: Substantially reduce the number of affected people globally by 2030, aiming to lower the average global figure per 100,000 between 2020-2030 compared with 2005-2015. See PreventionWeb by UNDRR for more information https://www.preventionweb.net/sendai-framework/sendai-framework-at-a-glance.

85   Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and UNDRR, "Sendai Framework Monitoring tool", database. Available at https://sendaimonitor.undrr.org/ (accessed on March 2024).

86   World Bank, *Gender Dimensions of Disaster Risk and Resilience: Existing Evidence* (Washington, D.C., 2021).

87   UN-Women, Tonga Department of Statistics, and Australian Aid, "Gender and Environment Survey 2022", report (n.p., 2023).

88   World Bank, *Gender Dimensions of Disaster Risk and Resilience: Existing Evidence* (Washington, D.C., 2021).

It has been widely recognized that **gender-based violence** against women and girls, including domestic violence, rape and sexual assault, escalates in both emergency contexts and slower-onset disasters such as pandemics and droughts. Temporary shelters in emergencies, that are not designed considering the needs of women and girls, often expose women and girls to an intensified risk of harassment and assault. Economic coping strategies, such as child and forced marriage, transactional sex and trafficking, and economic drivers of violence in the form of impoverishment due to disaster losses also emerge as significant concerns in post-disaster situations.[89]

Women are largely disadvantaged **economically** in disaster contexts. In developing countries, agriculture is a critical economic sector for women's employment. Female farmers, often engaged in small-scale operations with limited resources and technologies, tend to be more vulnerable to disasters compared to their male counterparts. Moreover, women usually perform increased unpaid care and domestic work after a disaster, at the cost of losing other income-generating activities. Women's lack of access to bank accounts further implies that their assets are less protected than men's when disasters take place.[90] Globally, 74 per cent of women had an account at a bank or similarly regulated deposit-taking financial institution, including a mobile money service provider, compared to 78 per cent of men in 2021. In developing economies, the gender gap was wider, with 68 per cent of women owning an account compared to 74 per cent of men.[91]

Women's **ability to cope and recover** in the aftermath of a disaster is impeded by their restricted access to social protection, stable income and formal sources of finance. In developing economies, only 50 per cent of women could access emergency money within 30 days without much difficulty compared to 59 per cent of men in 2021. Women's most popular source of funds in emergencies is family, which can be unreliable.[92]

Furthermore, discrimination in relief assistance disadvantages women. For example, female heads of households may experience direct discrimination when relief goods are distributed exclusively through male heads in some disaster-stricken areas. Some women may face indirect discrimination due to lack of access to essential documentation, for example, proof of title to marital property after the death of their husbands, making ownership challenging to prove.[93]

Disasters pose heightened risks for population groups in vulnerable situations, such as women and girls with disabilities. They are often excluded from early warning, relief or emergency response programmes due to the inaccessibility of infrastructure, information and services. Women and girls with disabilities face increased vulnerability to gender-based violence, significant challenges in managing menstrual hygiene and additional barriers to accessing essential services in disasters, partially resulting from their exclusion from social networks and prevalent stigma and discrimination based on gender, disability and other identifiers.[94]

Disaster risk exposures are fundamentally different among men and women, due to differences in their social roles and responsibilities, living environment, communication channels, and perceptions of risks.[95] Available data show that women remained more frequently affected by disasters and the gender data gap remains large and apparent. Sex-disaggregated data on disaster impacts need to be analysed in conjunction with exposure and vulnerability information to provide a full picture on why certain population groups are experiencing higher mortality, morbidity, or have their livelihoods and shelters more affected. Effective outreach initiatives and improved data collection methodology to include women and young girls in the data value chain are urgently needed to enhance data capacity and quality and to inform prudent gender-responsive policies and actions that reduce disaster risks and impacts for all.

89   UN-Women, UNFPA and UNDRR, *Beyond Vulnerabilities to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment and Leadership in Disaster Risk Reduction: Critical Actions for the United Nations System.* United Nations Joint Study on the Status of Gender Equality and Women's Leadership in DRR (New York and Geneva, 2021).

90   World Bank, *Gender Dimensions of Disaster Risk and Resilience: Existing Evidence* (Washington, D.C., 2021).

91   World Bank, *The Global Findex Database 2021: Financial Inclusion, Digital Payments, and Resilience in the Age of COVID-19* (Washington, D.C, 2022).

92   Ibid.

93   UN-Women, UNFPA and UNDRR, *Beyond Vulnerabilities to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment and Leadership in Disaster Risk Reduction: Critical Actions for the United Nations System.* United Nations Joint Study on the Status of Gender Equality and Women's Leadership in DRR (New York and Geneva, 2021).

94   UNDP, "Beyond disasters: How UNDP is addressing inequality and empowering women with disabilities for a resilient future", blog, 12 October 2023. Available at https://www.undp.org/geneva/blog/beyond-disasters-how-undp-addressing-inequality-and-empowering-women-disabilities-resilient-future (accessed on 16 July 2024).

95   Alice Fothergill, "The neglect of gender in disaster work: An overview of the literature," *International Journal of Mass Emergencies & Disasters*, vol. 14, no. 1 (January 1996) and Pamela Showalter, "The Gendered Terrain of Disaster: Through Women's Eyes", *Journal of Political Ecology*, vol. 6 (December 1999).

Climate change

The global mean near-surface temperature was around 1.40±0.12°C above the 1850–1900 average in 2023 (data up to October), marking it as the warmest year in the 174-year observational record.[96] The decade 2011–2020 was the warmest on record for both land and ocean, and each successive decade since the 1990s has been warmer than all previous decades.[97] Human activities, primarily the release of polluting gases from burning fossil fuel, are the main causes of climate change.[98] The changes in temperatures and precipitation, the increased frequency and magnitude of extreme weather events and biodiversity loss profoundly affect the availability and quality of land, water and other natural resources. They also pose significant threats to human health, food security and livelihoods. **Importantly, climate factors are often associated with worsening gender-related outcomes**.[99]

The accelerated pace of climate change carries significant implications for **health outcomes**. Climate hazards, including extreme heat, are linked to heightened risks of developing complications that result in adverse maternal and perinatal outcomes. These include a range of causes of maternal and neonatal morbidity and mortality, such as gestational diabetes, hypertensive disorders of pregnancy, preterm birth, low birth weight and stillbirth.[100] The effects of exposure to climate hazards during and after pregnancy may also affect women's mental health and lead to intergenerational trauma.[101] In addition, without additional adaptation measures, the burdens of several food-borne, water-borne and vector-borne diseases are projected to increase due to climate change.[102] Women often participate in agriculture and other household work, such as fetching water, placing them at great risk of contracting climate-sensitive diseases. Older women often experience high poverty rates and have limited access to resources, increasing their risk of health complications and mortality during climate-induced weather events, such as extreme heat, cold spells and air pollution.[103]

Empirical evidence from five Asian countries[104] suggests that temperature rises are linked to the increased prevalence of **child marriage and adolescent births** in Cambodia, Bangladesh and Nepal, countries where child marriage remains a pervasive practice. More frequent drought episodes correlate with the **lack of access to basic drinking water sources** in Bangladesh and Cambodia, as well as **clean fuel for cooking** in Bangladesh and the Philippines. Moreover, increases in relative aridity are associated with deteriorating gender-related outcomes, such as higher rates of child marriage and adolescent births in Bangladesh and Nepal, while the effects are relatively small. In Timor-Leste, instances of **intimate partner violence**, difficulties in accessing basic water sources and reliance on unclean fuel intensify notably in arid clusters.[105] It is essential to note that the diminishing availability of natural resources resulting from climate change clearly affects women's and girls' **unpaid care and domestic work**. They are compelled to cope with resource scarcity by dedicating more time and effort to resource collection for the household or by reducing consumption in many contexts.[106]

Climate change exerts substantial impacts on women's **employment and livelihood** across sectors. For example, female smallholder farmers tend to be more exposed to climate risks than their male counterparts, as women have fewer endowments and entitlements, more limited access to information and services, and less mobility.[107] Women comprise the majority of workers in the post-harvest fishing sector, involved in fish processing and sales. The reduction of fish stocks due to climate change often results in women being edged out of the fish trade by local men and migrants.[108] Findings from an FAO study covering 24 low- and middle-income countries in five world regions indicated that female-headed households lost significantly more incomes than male-headed households on the occurrence of extreme weather events.

96   WMO, *Provisional State of the Global Climate in 2023* (Geneva, 2023).
97   WMO, *The Global Climate 2011–2020: A Decade of Accelerating Climate Change* (Geneva, 2023).
98   UNEP, "Facts about the climate emergency", web page. Available at https://www.unep.org/facts-about-climate-emergency (accessed on 16 March 2024).
99   ESCAP, "Advancing gender equality in Asia and the Pacific in the context of climate change", policy paper No. 2023/10 (Bangkok, 2023) and UN-Women, *Gendered Impacts of Climate Change: Empirical Evidence from Asia* (New York, 2023).
100 WHO and others, *Protecting maternal, newborn and child health from the impacts of climate change: A call for action* (Geneva, 2023).
101 WHO and others, *Protecting maternal, newborn and child health from the impacts of climate change: A call for action* (Geneva, 2023).
102 International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), "Climate change impacts and risks, fact sheet-health", fact sheet (Geneva, 2023).
103 ESCAP, *Climate Change and Population Ageing in the Asia-Pacific Region: Status, Challenges and Opportunities,* (2022).
104 Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nepal, the Philippines and Timor-Leste.
105 UN-Women, *Gendered Impacts of Climate Change: Empirical Evidence from Asia* (New York, 2023).
106 UN-Women, "The Climate-care nexus: Addressing the linkages between climate change and women's and girls' unpaid care, domestic and communal work", working paper (New York, 2023).
107 FAO, *Agriculture and Climate Change: Law and Governance in Support of Climate Smart Agriculture and International Climate Change Goals* (Rome, 2020).
108 UN-Women, *Women's Economic Empowerment in Fisheries in the Blue Economy of the Indian Ocean Rim: A Baseline Report* (New York, 2020).

Women often take on additional work and lost more income opportunities compared to men in the wake of such events. One day of extreme temperature or precipitation was associated with a 1.3 per cent and 0.5 per cent reduction, respectively, in the total incomes of female-headed households relative to male-headed households. This resulted in annual average income losses of 8 per cent due to heat stress and 3 per cent due to floods for households headed by women relative to households headed by men. Moreover, a 1°C increase in long-term average temperatures was associated with a 34 per cent reduction in the total incomes of female-headed households relative to male-headed households. Differences in climate vulnerability between women and men stem from social structures and discriminatory norms that shape gendered patterns in resource and service access, time use and income opportunities.[109]

Migration decisions in the context of climate change are also influenced by gender and intersecting economic, political, social, demographic and cultural factors. Women often face limitations and increased risks at all stages of migration due to entrenched gender inequalities and discriminatory norms, but migration can be part of an adaptation strategy to build resilience and reduce exposure to climate hazards. For many women, the decision to migrate in the context of climate change is often associated with the scarcity of natural resources, as women generally share the primary responsibility for supplying resources for their families.

Gender, coupled with other socioeconomic factors, plays an essential role in shaping the length and experience of migration. For example, in Bangladesh, short-term migration is common in climate change-affected areas. Most of the workers migrating internationally were men. Women who migrated internationally to engage in short-term contracts in the Gulf States and other countries had lower socioeconomic status and were poorer than women workers who migrated internally. While migration can bring an opportunity for increased autonomy and independence for some women, it also exposes them to risks, such as gender-based violence and trafficking. Specifically, women in vulnerable situations tend to have constrained adaptive capacities due to limited resources and access to legal, policy and decision-making processes.[110]

Women and girls are among the most affected by climate change due to their socioeconomic roles and discriminatory factors, which further amplify their vulnerability to climate-related risks. In response to climate crises, there is a growing demand for strengthened adaptation and resilience-building mechanisms that are tailored to the needs of women and girls.

7.3.2 Women's and girls' participation in disaster risk reduction and climate action

Disaster risk reduction

Women's and girls' participation and leadership is critical to managing disaster risk and designing, resourcing and implementing gender-responsive DRR policies, plans and programmes.[111] The Asia-Pacific regional report on the Midterm Review of the Implementation of the Sendai Framework indicated that **women and youth are increasingly engaged in DRR decision-making and are being recognized for their crucial roles at national, subnational and local levels. However, many disaster management institutions are still predominantly led by men in most countries across the Asia-Pacific region.** There is a great opportunity to enhance participation and leadership of women in risk governance institutions at all administrative levels.[112]

A 2022 study on career barriers and motivations for women and men working in DRR in Asia and the Pacific suggested that obstacles to women's career advancement, well-being and retention include care demands placed on women with children, organizational constraints on women's workplace authenticity, lower work-life balance and lower quality professional relationships with co-workers, especially senior colleagues, compared to men. Women also exhibit a lesser inclination than men to sacrifice personal time and relationships for their career advancement in DRR, potentially influenced by the perception of limited rewards for such sacrifices. To improve women's and men's career outcomes in DRR, efforts are needed to increase the diversity of leaders and role models, improve work-life balance and address burnout, and foster an enabling environment that encourages a sense of belonging and the authentic expression of valued social identities.[113]

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109 FAO, *The Unjust Climate: Measuring the Impacts of Climate Change on Rural Poor, Women and Youth* (Rome 2024). For detailed methodologies in calculating gender differences, please refer to annex 2 of the publication. Available at https://openknowledge.fao.org/items/80b4a374-42de-4340-bdc8-d4132a069c55 (accessed on 14 July 2024).

110 UN-Women, *Ensuring Safe and Regular Migration for Women and Girls in the Context of Climate Change* (New York, 2023).

111 UNDRR, *A Review of Gender and the Sendai Framework* (Geneva, 2023).

112 UNDRR, *The Midterm Review of the Implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030: Regional Report for Asia-Pacific* (Geneva, 2023).

113 UNDRR, *Career Barriers and Motivations for Women and Men Working in Disaster Risk Reduction: A Snapshot in the Asia-Pacific Region* (Geneva, 2023).

Climate action

Women and girls are becoming more involved in climate action. Nevertheless, their participation and leadership still fall short of achieving gender parity or attaining a critical mass to influence decision-making.[114] Analysis of the gender composition of decision-making and technical bodies, also known as constituted bodies, under UN Climate Change showed that female representation averaged 38 per cent in 2023 compared to 39 per cent in 2022, having increased in 12 bodies from 2013 to 2023. In addition, at the 27th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 27), the 17th Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP 17) and the fourth Conference of the Parties Serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement (CMA 4), the representation of women was 37 per cent, remaining the same as COP 26, CMP 16 and CMA 3. Female representation among heads and deputy heads of delegation increased from 26 per cent (COP 26/CMP 16/CMA 3) to 29 per cent (COP 27/CMP 17/CMA 4).[115]

Women's participation and leadership in climate action requires continued enhancement at the national level. As of January 2023, global data indicated that women held only 32 per cent of cabinet minister positions in charge of environment; 13 per cent in agriculture, food, forestry, fishing and hunting; and a mere 11 per cent in energy, natural resource fuels and mining.[116] A comparison of the first- and second-generation Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement revealed notable progress in generic gender reference (46 per cent to 96 per cent) and gender-responsive targets, policies and measures (13 per cent to 55 per cent). However, only 24 per cent of countries identified national gender institutions as part of national climate change governance structures, and 27 per cent noted the importance of women's participation in decision-making on climate action.[117] In the Asia-Pacific region, 37 out of the 49 countries with NDCs developed and updated by 2023 have mentioned gender, although the majority of them made minimal references. Among these 37 countries, eight identified women as vulnerable to climate change and 10 acknowledged women as agents of change and decision-makers

essential for driving climate action. A comprehensive approach to mainstreaming gender into climate policies and actions is imperative across the region.[118]

7.3.3 Promoting gender-responsive disaster and climate risk governance

Disaster risk reduction and response

Addressing gender-differentiated impacts of disasters and promoting women's participation in DRR require active interventions. **Good practices taken by Asia-Pacific Governments on integrating gender perspectives into DRR efforts have been identified across all four priorities of the Sendai Framework**, namely, understanding disaster risk; strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk; investing in disaster risk reduction for resilience; and enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to "build back better" in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

A number of Governments in the region have demonstrated a steadfast commitment to increasing the understanding of how gender intersects with disaster risk and enhancing the integration of specific expertise to inform DRR practices (Priority 1 of the Sendai Framework). Advancements in integrating gender equality and social inclusion into national DRR frameworks or broader legislative and planning frameworks for DRR have been widely documented. Additionally, some Governments have harnessed a whole-of-society and multistakeholder approach (Priority 2). Despite limited overall progress, a few countries have set financial targets and budget allocations for gender equality and social inclusion and invested in social protection measures, targeting underlying economic risk factors (Priority 3). Furthermore, many Governments have tackled gender and other social inequalities in disaster preparedness and response and integrated the needs of women and girls into efforts to "build back better" (Priority 4).[119]

There are several examples of recent positive actions in line with the Sendai Frameworks priorities in Asia-Pacific countries. **India**'s Agenda on Disaster Risk Reduction highlights that "women's leadership and greater involvement should be central to disaster risk management" as one of its ten points.[120] In 2022, women were included for the first time

114 United Nations, "Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes, Report of the Secretary-General", E/CN.6/2022/3 (New York, 2022).

115 UN Climate Change, "Gender balance", web page. Available at https://unfccc.int/topics/gender/workstreams/gender-action-plan/gender-balance (accessed on 18 March 2024).

116 IPU and UN-Women, "Women in Politics: 2023", data sheet (Geneva and New York, 2023).

117 UNDP, *Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) Global Outlook Report 2021: The State of Climate Ambition* (New York, 2021).

118 UN-Women, "Unpacking gender integration in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) of Asia-Pacific countries", brief (New York, 2023).

119 UNDRR, *Accelerating Action on Gender Equality in Disaster Risk Reduction by 2030: A Cross-Cutting Analysis of Reports to the Midterm Review of the Sendai Framework Highlighting Good Practices and Areas to Strengthen for Gender-Responsive and Socially Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction* (Geneva, 2023).

120 India, Ministry of Home Affairs, *Agenda on Disaster Risk Reductions* (New Delhi, 2023).

in National Disaster Response Forces teams.[121] In 2022, **Japan** disseminated case studies on good practices concerning women's engagement in local disaster management activities. Local governments developed DRR guidelines that incorporated gender perspectives into the entire disaster risk management cycle. Following a 2021 proposal by Women's Association for Disaster Management, the Basic Disaster Management Plan was amended to include the percentage of female officials in local disaster management councils. In 2020, the Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality was formulated, promoting gender perspectives in disaster preparedness and recovery measures.

Nepal's Disaster Risk Reduction National Strategic Plan of Action 2018–2030 highlights gender-specific vulnerabilities and opportunities. Through an inclusive and multistakeholder approach to DRR, local capacities in risk monitoring and assessment were strengthened, with increased participation and leadership of women, youth, older persons and persons with disabilities in community resilience efforts. Moreover, formal committees, humanitarian clusters and task groups were established to facilitate collaboration among governments, civil society, the private sector and international organizations.[122] Importantly, the country adopted the Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion in Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Strategic Plan in 2024 to further foster inclusive disaster management.[123]

In **New Zealand**, research was initiated to better understand the social elements of disasters, including well-being and vulnerability aspects. The Government also integrated indigenous and differing sexual orientation and gender identity voices into DRR frameworks. **Viet Nam** developed "a system of gender-, disability-, and other vulnerability-related indicators, along with sex, age-, and disability disaggregated data (SADDD)" from 2019 to 2022. It contributed to a better understanding of the intersection of vulnerability and disasters, including risks to marginalized groups and gendered impacts. In addition, guidelines were formulated in 2017 on gender mainstreaming in community-based disaster risk management programmes and projects. Viet Nam Women's Unions at all levels supported women

in disaster-prone areas by meeting their needs, enhancing their capacities in disaster preparedness, and facilitating access to technologies and sustainable livelihoods.[124]

Climate risk governance

Regarding gender-responsive climate risk governance, some Governments stand out for their policy frameworks or institutional mechanisms that address the interlinkage of gender and climate change. For example, **Fiji** promotes gender-responsive climate action as a critical policy pillar across adaptation and mitigation activities. The National Climate Change Policy 2018–2030 calls for improved gender balance in decision-making processes and implementation arrangements. It also emphasizes that gender must be a key consideration when programming finance and capacity-building.[125] In 2022, **New Zealand** launched the International Climate Finance Strategy with the aim of reducing gender inequalities and addressing the impact of climate change. The Strategy has been supported by a climate finance commitment of $1.3 billion NDZ for 2022 to 2025. As of June 2023, 84 per cent of the funding had been approved for delivery, with more than half disbursed within the Pacific and dedicated to adaptation activities.[126]

Cambodia developed the Master Plan on Gender and Climate Change 2018-2030 and the Action Plan on Gender and Climate Change 2019-2023, with the aim of mainstreaming gender into environmental and climate action.[127] The Climate Change Strategic Plan 2014–2023 includes a strategic objective of reducing "sectoral, regional, gender vulnerability and health risks to climate change impacts." The Ministry of Women's Affairs has established a Gender and Climate Change Committee, which conducts studies on the impact of climate change on women and children and builds capacities of the ministry's departments.[128] **Indonesia** launched its National Action Plan on Gender and Climate Change in 2024, with the engagement of all relevant ministries as well as civil society organizations, including women's groups, indigenous community associations and disability organizations.[129] Furthermore, the Government has implemented gender-responsive budgeting for

121 Times of India, "In a first, eight women in team of NDRF rescuers", news, 18 July 2022. Available at https://ndrf.gov.in/news/gujarat-first-eight-women-team-ndrf-rescuers (accessed on 7 August 2024).
122 UNDRR, *Accelerating Action on Gender Equality in Disaster Risk Reduction by 2030: A Cross-Cutting Analysis of Reports to the Midterm Review of the Sendai Framework Highlighting Good Practices and Areas to Strengthen for Gender-Responsive and Socially Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction* (Geneva, 2023).
123 Nepal, Ministry of Women, Children, and Senior Citizens, *National Report on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (Kathmandu, 2024).
124 UNDRR, *Accelerating Action on Gender Equality in Disaster Risk Reduction by 2030: A Cross-Cutting Analysis of Reports to the Midterm Review of the Sendai Framework Highlighting Good Practices and Areas to Strengthen for Gender-Responsive and Socially Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction* (Geneva, 2023).
125 Government of Fiji, *Republic of Fiji National Climate Change Policy 2018–2030* (Suva, 2019) and ESCAP and others, *Is 1.5°C within Reach for the Asia-Pacific Region? Ambition and Potential of NDC Commitments of the Asia-Pacific Countries* (United Nations publication, 2021).
126 New Zealand, Ministry of Women, *National Report on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (Wellington, 2024).
127 Cambodia, Ministry of Women Affairs, *National Report on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (Phnom Penh, 2024).
128 Government of Cambodia, *Cambodia's Updated Nationally Determined Contribution 2020* (Phnom Penh, 2020).
129 Indonesia, The Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection, *National Report on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (Jakarta, 2024).

climate change. This initiative aims to provide support to vulnerable communities, particularly women who perform heavy care responsibilities. For example, the gender-sensitive budget has facilitated improved access to water by funding the construction of a well, as well as enhancing food security through an agroforestry programme.[130]

Pakistan's Climate Change Gender Action Plan, launched in 2022, mainstreams gender strategies in climate action across key sectors, including agriculture and food security; forests and biodiversity; integrated coastal management; water and sanitation; energy and transport; and DRR. Priority measures centre on increasing women's participation in decision-making, strengthening coordination and institutionalization to address gender issues, and collecting gender-disaggregated data and investing in context-specific research.[131] **Sri Lanka**, in its NDC revision process, proposed a multi-step approach to integrating gender into NDC implementation plans by sector. This includes conducting sector-specific gender analysis, developing gender-responsive actions, enhancing capacities to engage women in planning and monitoring of NDCs, and allocating resources for gender-responsive practices.[132]

BOX 7.3   Climate financing for gender equality

Global climate finance has increased over the past decade, reaching $632 billion in 2019-2020, but this falls short of the $4.35 trillion needed annually by 2030 to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Despite this growth, only a small percentage of climate finance reaches women, with just 10 per cent flowing to the local level, 1 per cent of gender equality funding going to women's organizations, and 3 per cent of environmental philanthropy supporting women's environmental activism. Between 2017 and 2018, merely 4 per cent of bilateral aid was specifically dedicated to gender equality, and only 30–40 per cent of environmental aid incorporated gender equality aspects.

Recognizing the potential to address gender inequality and climate change simultaneously, efforts have been made by climate funds to systematize gender considerations in climate finance. For instance, the Climate Investment Funds (CIF) and the Green Climate Fund (GCF) have implemented gender action plans and require gender assessments for funding proposals. Nonetheless, challenges such as insufficient local stakeholder involvement, inadequate monitoring of gender impacts and limited reporting on gender benefits remain.[1]

The private sector shows promise with innovative financing mechanisms. For example, Impact Investment Exchange (IIX) initiated the Orange Bond, a sustainable debt asset class for investing with a gender lens. To qualify as an Orange Bond, transactions should align with three overarching principles: gender-positive capital allocation, gender-lens capacity and diversity in leadership, and transparency in the investment process and reporting. While the primarily purpose of an Orange Bond is to advance gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, in many cases, Orange Bonds are also expected to create additional co-benefits and positive impacts on climate action and sustainable development. Orange Bonds represent a cross-cutting asset class that can qualify as Green Bonds, Social Bonds, Sustainability Bonds or Sustainability-Linked Bonds in accordance with the guidelines issued by the International Capital Markets Association (ICMA).[2] The sixth issuance of the Women's Livelihood Bond, the largest Orange Bond to date, mobilized 100 million United States dollars, empowering enterprises that prioritize women and girls across five countries (Cambodia, India, Kenya, the Philippines and Viet Nam) and six sectors (agriculture, water and sanitation, clean energy, affordable housing, small and medium-sized enterprise lending and microfinance).[3]

1   World Bank, "Placing gender equality at the centre of climate action", Work Bank Group Gender Thematic Policy Notes Series: Issues and Practice Note (Washington, D.C., 2023).
2   Orange Movement, "Orange Bonds: A cross-cutting asset class for investing in gender equity", web page. Available at https://orangemovement.global/orange-bonds (accessed on 25 July 2024) and Orange Bond Initiative, "Orange Bond Principles". Available at https://iixglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Orange-Bond-Principles%E2%84%A2.pdf (accessed on 25 July 2024).
3   Impact Investment Exchange (IIX), Impact Report 2023: Driving Collaborative Impact (Singapore, n.d.).

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130 UNDP, "Climate crisis-affected communities in Indonesia benefiting from gender-sensitive budgeting", web page. Available at https://www.undp.org/indonesia/news/climate-crisis-affected-communities-indonesia-benefiting-gender-sensitive-budgeting (accessed on 31 May 2024).
131 IUCN Pakistan, Climate Change Gender Action Plan of the Government and People of Pakistan (Islamabad, 2022) and UN-Women, "Unpacking gender integration in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) of Asia-Pacific countries", brief (New York, 2023).
132 Government of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka Updated Nationally Determined Contributions, September-2021 (Battaramulla, 2021).

An indigenous woman in Viet Nam uses solar drying systems provided by the EmPower project. Bắc Kạn Province, October 2022.
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7.4 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Women and men interact with environmental factors differently, as demonstrated by the gender dimensions of access to land, food, water, energy and other natural resources, as well as the gender-differentiated impacts of disasters and climate change. On the other hand, women and girls continue to face marginalization in their participation and leadership in key sectors related to natural resource management, DRR and climate action. Towards a joint gender and environment agenda, it is imperative to advance gender equality policies that give due consideration to environmental goals and to integrate a gender lens into environmental policies and strategies. Moreover, gender-environment considerations should also be incorporated into transboundary policies, such as trade, investment and development cooperation.[133] Despite some progress made in the past decade, entrenched social norms and stereotypes, as well as gendered power dynamics surrounding resource allocation and decision-making, result in persistent resistance from both male and female policymakers to acknowledging gender issues in the environmental field and implementing gender-responsive recommendations.

The availability of sex-disaggregated data is essential for assessing the differences in how women, men, girls and boys interact with and are impacted by environmental factors. However, according to a mapping of gender data availability in five Asia-Pacific countries in the period 2010-2020, among the six assessed domains, the environmental domain had the lowest proportion of indicators with sex-disaggregated data, standing at only 4 per cent at the national level.[134] This impedes the effective understanding of the gender-environment nexus. In addition to closing the gap in data availability, achieving environmental sustainability with gender equality at its core requires significantly increased public and private financing, especially for women's organizations and enterprises. Accessible and affordable funding for environment initiatives led by these organizations often yields direct benefits for the resilience of the broader community.

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133 OECD, *Gender and the Environment: Building Evidence and Policies to Achieve the SDGs* (Paris 2022).
134 Open Data Watch, Data2X and ESCAP, "Bridging the gap: Mapping gender data availability in Asia and the Pacific", technical report (n.p., 2021).

Governments, along with other relevant stakeholders, should consider the following recommendations: [135]

+ Adopt, strengthen and implement gender-responsive laws and policy frameworks across sectors that ensure equality in land tenure, inheritance rights and access to natural resources, and that foster equal opportunities for participation in managing the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources, including in conflict and crisis settings.

+ Integrate a gender lens into the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of environmental, DRR and climate change policies and programmes, including through the institutionalization of gender-responsive and transformative approaches at scale and the enhancement of coordination across sectors and all levels of government.

+ Conduct gender impact assessments of existing laws, policies and programmes in the environmental field; examine deep-rooted causes of resistance to gender-responsive and transformative approaches; and sensitize policymakers, women's groups and other stakeholders to the gender-environment nexus, including through challenging negative social norms and gender stereotypes.

+ Strengthen linkages between the CEDAW reporting mechanism and the Sendai Framework, including through the explicit and extensive use of General recommendation No.37 on gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in a changing climate adopted by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, as a way to establish close connections between national gender and DRR institutions. [136]

+ Build the resilience of all women and girls in the context of environmental degradation, disasters and climate change through the budgeting, financing and provision of accessible and inclusive infrastructure, public services and social protection.

+ Invest in girls' and women's education, training and lifelong learning in STEM-related fields and promote the equal access of women to decent work in environment-sensitive sectors, such as agriculture, water, energy, transport and other industries, especially by addressing occupational segregation and discriminatory social norms.

+ Achieve gender parity in decision-making bodies in both public and private sectors, including by adopting temporary affirmative measures such as quotas, to ensure the meaningful participation and leadership of women, particularly women in vulnerable situations, in environmental, disaster and climate risk governance.

+ Ensure that national statistical systems prioritize the production of data that accurately reflect the nexus between gender and the environment, including through the conduct of national specialized surveys on gender and the environment and the adoption of tools, such as the gender-environment indicators for the Asia-Pacific region [137], while promoting the use of data to inform gender-responsive policymaking and programming.

+ Mobilize financial resources from all sources, including public, private, national and international resources, to enhance investment in gender-responsive environmental, DRR and climate change policies and programmes, The focus should be on increasing capital flows to women's organizations in line with their needs and capacities; exploring innovative private sector financing instruments, such as environment, social and governance (ESG)-related bonds on gender, sustainability bonds and green bonds; enhancing concessional and blended finance mechanisms to attract private sector capital to areas perceived as high risk or low return; and investing in women-founded or led, green and climate businesses. [138]

+ Build the technical and financial capacities of women's organizations and enterprises to proactively empower women and girls to access information, training, technology and financial services, enabling them to effectively participate in and lead efforts on natural resource management, DRR and climate change mitigation and adaptation.

+ Provide support and funding for a gender-responsive, just transition to regenerative green and blue economies that prioritize social protection and acknowledge women's and girls' undue unpaid care and domestic work, including through international and regional cooperation in financing, technology transfer and knowledge sharing.

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135 Adapted from key policy recommendations proposed in United Nations, "Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes, Report of the Secretary-General", E/CN.6/2022/3 (New York, 2022) and OECD, *Gender and the Environment: Building Evidence and Policies to Achieve the SDGs* (Paris 2022).

136 According to a UNDRR study, from 2018 to April 2022, 73 countries submitted reports to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Only 2 mentioned General recommendation No.37, 12 mentioned disaster-related terms, and 22 mentioned climate change. There is significant convergence between the criteria for CEDAW reporting and four priorities of the Sendai Framework. For more information, please see UNDRR, *Scoping Study on the Use of CEDAW General Recommendation No.37 on Gender-Related Dimensions of Disaster Risk Reduction in a Changing Climate* (Geneva, 2023).

137 See annex in ESCAP and UN-Women, "Efforts towards measuring the gender-environment nexus in Asia and the Pacific", working paper (Bangkok, 2023).

138 World Bank, "Placing gender equality at the centre of climate action", Work Bank Group Gender Thematic Policy Notes Series: Issues and Practice Note (Washington, D.C., 2023).

PART

III

THE WAY FORWARD
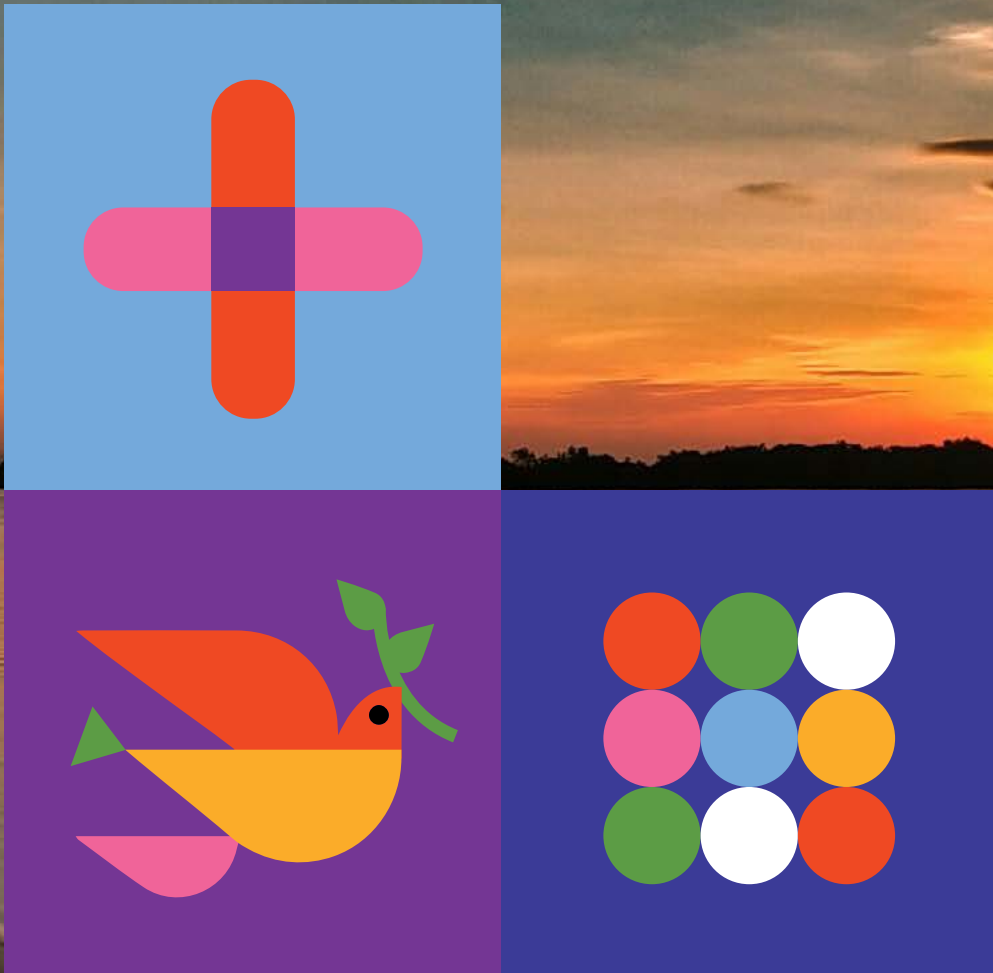
CHAPTER 8

Forward-looking strategies for gender-transformative outcomes in Asia and the Pacific

A woman with disability doing sports. © Getty Images/Alex Liew

The review of the six thematic areas of issues related to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in Asia and the Pacific provides valuable information on areas where the region has made progress, 30 years after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA). Areas that require further investment and concerted action by governments and key stakeholders have also been identified. A range of strategic opportunities have emerged from this assessment which the region can harness to achieve better outcomes.

This chapter elaborates on three sets of strategies for collective regional action and increased future investment. The first set of strategies outline actions to make substantial changes in three areas with the largest gaps in the implementation of BPfA. These areas include: (i) women's economic empowerment and resilience; (ii) women's representation, participation and leadership; and (iii) gender-based violence and access to justice. The second set of strategies focuses on actions to harness opportunities presented by three key transitions that have emerged since the adoption of BPfA in 1995 for achieving gender-transformative outcomes across thematic areas. The transitions are a just transition towards green and blue economies, the emerging care economy, and digital and technological transformation. The third set

of strategies proposes targeted actions to strengthen the foundations for the region to accelerate progress towards gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, in the following cross-cutting areas: gender social norms, gender data and statistics, gender-smart financing, and innovative partnerships.

8.1 THE WAY FORWARD: ACCELERATE ACTION WHERE THE BIGGEST GAPS REMAIN SINCE 1995

To accelerate the implementation of commitments made through the BPfA, actions and resources must be prioritized to areas where the largest gaps remain. Among the 40 Asia-Pacific governments participating in the global survey for the Beijing+30 review carried out in 2024, at least half of these governments indicated that they would accord priority to the following areas for accelerating progress in the next five years: (i) eliminating violence against women and girls; (ii) quality education, training and life-long learning for women and girls; (iii) economic empowerment of women including through women's entrepreneurship and women's enterprises; (iv) political participation and representation; and (v) equity and non-discrimination and access to justice (Figure 8.1).

FIGURE 8.1 **Top priorities selected by Asia-Pacific governments for accelerating progress, 2020–2024 versus 2025–2030 (percentage of reporting countries)**

Priority	Past	Future
Eliminating violence against women and girls	88	85
Quality education, training and life-long learning	55	58
Equality and non-discrimination and access to justice	50	40
Women's entrepreneurship and women's enterprises	48	53
Political participation and representation	45	50
Access to health care, including SRHRR	43	35
Right to work and rights at work	33	30
Ending poverty, agriculture yield, and food security	23	20
Changing discriminatory social norms and stereotypes	20	10
Unpaid care and domestic work	20	23
Gender-responsive budgeting	20	28
Gender-responsive social protection	18	5
Digital and financial inclusion for women	10	10
Gender-responsive DRR and resilience building	8	10
Other	5	13
Basic services and infrastructure	5	5
Women's participation in environmental sustainability	3	10
None of the above	0	0

PERCENTAGE

■ Past ■ Future

Source: Based on survey responses from 40 ESCAP member States participating in the global survey for the Beijing+30 review as of 18 July 2024. In the survey questionnaire, governments were asked to select the top five priorities for their actions undertaken in the past five years and the top five priorities for the next five years.

Some of these priority areas are interlinked. For instance, concerted investment in quality education, training and life-long learning; women's entrepreneurship; access to health care, including sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights; work-related rights; addressing unpaid care and domestic work; gender-responsive social protection; and digital and financial inclusion for women will contribute to reduced poverty and greater economic empowerment of women and girls. Similarly, eliminating violence against women and girls cannot be achieved without strengthening equality and non-discrimination and access to justice. Women's participation and representation — in politics and/or other developmental areas such as environmental sustainability – are central to upholding women's rights, especially in the context of the megatrends in the region. Gender-responsive budgeting serves as an enabler for accelerated actions, while changing discriminatory social norms and stereotypes is fundamental to achieving transformative changes.

Based on major gaps, challenges and opportunities identified under Part II and the priorities identified by member States, the following recommendations, grouped under three broad thematic areas are made, for the consideration of national governments, and all relevant stakeholders, for implementation depending on the specific situation/context of their respective countries.

8.1.1 Advancing women's economic empowerment and resilience

Intersecting global crises have slowed down the region's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, compromised livelihoods and pushed more people and families into poverty, and threatened to erase hard-won progress on women's economic empowerment in the past three decades. These global crises, compounded with megatrends such as digital and technological transformation, climate change and population ageing, require countries to invest not only for stimulating growth but also for building resilience of their economies and people, particularly women and girls who are often hardest hit during various crises. Unleashing the tremendous untapped potential of women and girls would add trillions in value to the region's economies and enrich societies. More proactive measures are needed to protect income security, boost decent work and support entrepreneurship by women, by targeting policy interventions and investment where gaps and inequalities are wider. In particular, priority should be given to the following actions:

(a) Gender-responsive social protection should be presented not as a welfare expenditure but an enabler for sustainable growth. Social protection schemes in the region not only require an increase in the level of public spending but gender-responsive design and

operation that effectively deliver income security to women and girls across the life cycle and reach those who are currently not within reach, including women and girls among the rural poor, migrants, those living in urban slums and persons with disabilities across the region. Only when their income security is sufficiently protected, especially for those who engage in informal and vulnerable employment, can women and girls be empowered to stay active and productive in the economy. Schemes need to be developed to address the disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work that women and girls bear, and to enable them to enter, stay and participate fully in the labour market on a more equal footing with men.

(b) Gender-inclusive labour market policies in the region need to focus on equipping women and girls with a skills portfolio that are aligned with evolving labour market demands, creating not only more jobs but decent work, and turning care from a burden into a new engine of job growth. These measures are particularly important for low- and middle-income countries, as well as subregions, where the informal sector makes up a large share of the economy and the share of low-skilled workers remains large. These labour market actions need to be grounded in sustainable, inclusive human capital accumulation that is based upon the provision of equitable and quality education and health care, including sexual and reproductive health services. Countries need to act, in a timely and innovative manner, to adapt to and capitalize on opportunities presented by the emerging digital, green and care economies, which are particularly relevant to Asia and the Pacific given the region's rapid digitalization, heightened climate and environmental risks and population ageing. Supporting women and girls in the region to acquire the skills required to participate in the labour force of these growing sectors on an equal footing to men is essential. Public and private partnerships to invest in a regulated and formalized paid care sector and care-sensitive infrastructure would not only release women from unpaid work to participate in the labour market but also create millions of new job opportunities for women and men. Decent work principles and practices, including equal pay for work of equal value, equal access to social protection, elimination of work-related safety concerns and gender-based violence and harassment, as well as equal participation in social dialogues, need to be equally applied in these emerging sectors.

(c) Enabling entrepreneurial ecosystems for women require gender-inclusive, affirmative solutions to incentivize and empower women entrepreneurs to develop and grow their businesses, including in high-potential, high-value sectors such as those engaged in the digital and green economies. Particular attention is required to women-owned MSMEs which are extremely active in the region's economy overall

but remain vulnerable to shocks. Reforms are needed in business governance processes to remove barriers for women to register and thus formalize their businesses, including MSMEs, and extend favourable taxation and credit policies to cover women-owned MSMEs. More proactive measures are needed to empower women-owned MSMEs throughout the business value chain, including providing diversified solutions to capital access. Central to this push must be mobilizing microcredit and other financial institutions, impact investment instruments, venture capital and foreign direct investment; galvanizing public and procurement mechanisms to buy from women-owned businesses which would expand market access while helping to build viability of women-owned businesses; and prioritizing building business skills, especially for starting up and operating businesses in emerging sectors and the use of digital marketplaces and tools, and supporting networks for women entrepreneurs. Moreover, learning from lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, countries need to consider measures that strengthen the resilience of MSMEs, especially those owned by women, in times of crises. For instance, ensuring that shock-responsive measures such as those related to favourable taxation, credit and public procurement policies are within reach to women-owned MSMEs. Overcoming logistics and market access constraints should be central to response plans.

8.1.2 Enhancing women's representation, participation and leadership

Gender inequalities in all domains of life are underpinned by the persisting gender power imbalance, which is further complicated by its intersection with other factors such as age, disability, ethnicity, and disability. Shifting such power imbalances is not possible unless systematic changes are made to women's underrepresentation in politics and in leadership and decision-making across sectors. This shift is both a central objective of gender equality in itself and a catalyst for change. Action needs to go beyond non-discrimination measures and take a proactive enabling approach. The following priority actions are recommended:

(a) Creating a conducive environment for women's leadership requires comprehensive reforms in political and governance systems. Such reforms may include transitional and affirmative measures such as gender and equity quotas for electoral candidates and representation in parliaments and government institutions. Beyond this, investment is required in strategies that would bring about more systematic changes over time, including engaging political parties to adopt more gender-equal candidate nomination policies and allocate dedicated funding to support women candidates. The representation of

women and girls from diverse backgrounds needs to be considered in candidacy and political agenda-settings. Election commissions must implement gender-inclusive voter education to tackle gender biases and stereotypes about women's leadership capability and address gender-specific barriers to women's participation in political elections and governance processes. Such barriers include limited political literacy, lack of access to relevant information and procedural knowledge and an absence of care support in political processes.

Gender-responsive procedures and practices are required to shape recruitment, appointment, performance assessment, and career advancement in political and governance systems. Resources must be dedicated to capacity building programmes targeting women leaders and officers, and gender equality sensitization programmes for all leaders and personnel, including potential male champions. Strong measures are essential to combat violence and harassment against women political leaders, activists and voters both online and offline. Where appropriate, digital platforms may be leveraged as a safer, alternative space to enable expression of opinions by women and girls. Similar reforms are needed in the private sector to put more women in the leadership pipelines and positions.

(b) Breaking down gendered occupational segregation in management and leadership which prevails across politics, governance systems and private sectors requires a deliberate strategy. Investment in long-term norm-changing action is needed to transform the common undervaluation of "feminized" sectors and the stereotypical distinction between women's and men's capabilities. Only this can remove the expectations that confine women in certain sectors and functions, most likely those related to gender equality, women, children, family and welfare affairs, even when they are appointed to managerial or leadership positions. To make meaningful changes, countries need to put more women into professional, management and leadership pipelines across sectors, with intentional measures including quotas and targeted capacity building, especially in value chains and/or governance institutions for sectors of growing strategic importance such as those concerning digital technology, climate change, finance, peace and security, in both relevant value chains and governance institutions related to these sectors.

8.1.3 Eliminating gender-based violence and strengthening access to justice

Gender-based violence (GBV) and harmful practices, in its various overlapping forms, remain a major threat to the rights of women and girls in Asia and the Pacific, in particular their safety and security, economic empowerment and political participation. Gender-based violence often intersects with ageism, ableism and other sources of discrimination, posing challenges to intervention. The consequences, for both victims/survivors and for societies, are multifaceted and can be passed on to future generations. Yet change is possible, with deliberate investments in prevention and response recommended below:

(a) Designated action plans for GBV prevention and response need to be institutionalized at the national and subnational levels and, where appropriate, at the subregional or regional level to coordinate actions across borders. Such action plans should set clear objectives, indicators and targets for interventions, with well-resourced budgets, clear accountability of all actors involved, and a sound monitoring and evaluation plan. Action plans need to account for the intersectional discrimination and risk factors that contribute to GBV, based on sexual orientation and gender identity, age, disability, ethnicity, migrant status, refugee status and other socioeconomic factors, and tailor preventive and response measures to meet the differentiated needs of individuals of diverse backgrounds. In recent decades, an increasing number of countries have introduced national action plans to address GBV or violence against women and girls. However, many action plans centre on responding to violence after it has occurred, without sufficient focus on interventions focused on prevention.

More investment in prevention efforts is urgently needed. These should include school- and family-based socialization programmes engaging both women and men, girls and boys, community mobilization and media campaigns that aim at behaviour and social norm changes; community-based interventions to prevent violent extremism; interventions aimed to address economic and social stressors and build economic and social resilience of people and communities; investment in safe, gender-friendly public spaces, transportation and digital environments; and strengthening zero-tolerance laws and policies and community policing. A focus on primary prevention does not diminish the significance of victims/survivors-centred response measures and services that engage first responders across law enforcement, justice systems, education institutions, health systems, as well as social and community service sectors.

It is necessary to engage the private sector, particularly businesses premised in digital spaces, to respond to GBV occurring online, and to secure spaces for civil society engagement in action. The implementation of action plans to address GBV is often challenged by insufficient funding, lack of designated capacity and trained personnel and backlash on civic participation and gender equality, especially at times of crises

and in conflict-affected or emergency situations. To cope with these challenges, countries may consider strategic alignment between actions plans to address GBV, women, peace and security (WPS), prevention of violent extremism, access to justice for women and girls, as well as the broader action plan for gender equality and women's empowerment to enable more efficient use of resources and consolidated interventions. Diversified funding sources, including from the private sector, should be considered to better resource relevant actions.

(b) Tackling technology-facilitated gender-based violence and harmful practices should be an urgent priority in countries' strategies related to gender equality and to digitalization. The increasing digitalization of societies is characterized by vast scale, rapid speed and ease of online communication, and the anonymity, pseudonymity and impunity afforded by digital spaces. With weak legal and regulatory frameworks, these factors create a conducive environment that breeds technology-facilitated violence – ranging from online harassment to hate speech, threats and disinformation – that disproportionately affect women and girls, including politicians, activists and human rights defenders. The nature of technology-facilitated violence is constantly evolving, with new forms and patterns emerging alongside digital transformation and technological innovation. Research is needed to better understand the forms, impacts and dynamics of technology-facilitated violence. Effective regulatory systems must be established, coupled with increased support for gender-responsive prevention and response initiatives. Strong collaboration among governments, the technology sector, women's organizations, civil society and national human rights institutions is pivotal to establishing sound regulatory frameworks and platform accountability; improving risk identification, perpetrator tracking and accountability procedures; updating knowledge and capacity of GBV first responders, and making changes in the design (including algorithm), dissemination and use of digital technologies to prevent gender biases and stereotypes and tolerance to violence.

(c) Addressing gender-based violence in the peace and security context is of increasing importance to the region, given the heightened global peace and security risks. GBV is both a predictor of, and a tactic to create, peace and security threats. There have been many lessons learned that women and girls' rights have been too easily sidelined and their safety and security sabotaged during political turbulences, such as in Afghanistan and Myanmar, and in other emergency settings. National, regional and

international actors must take collaborative actions to identify risks of women's human rights violation, incorporate interventions to build economic and social resilience of women and girls and the local communities affected, provide victims/survivors-centred support, restore justice services and support transitional justice systems in the conflict-affected and emergency contexts. These measures need to be part of a holistic WPS agenda that involve all allies and highlight the engagement of women and girls as actors and active agents of change.

8.2 OPPORTUNITIES NOT TO BE MISSED: HARNESS KEY TRANSITIONS WITH PROFOUND IMPACT ON GENDER EQUALITY

The review of the megatrends and their linkages with the key thematic areas for the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) reveals the strategic importance of addressing gender concerns in three key transitions – the just (green) transition, digitalization and the care economy – that have emerged and/or intensified since the adoption of the BPfA in 1995. Strategies to close gender gaps in these key transitions align with the Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions[1] put forward by the United Nations Secretary-General to encourage investment in accelerating the SDGs, through a job-rich, human centred recovery and just ecological, technological and societal transitions, focusing on the green, digital and care economies. The section contains recommendations on strategic investments that could generate gender-transformative economic and social returns from these key transitions.

8.2.1 Making the just (green) transition gender-responsive

The gender-differentiated impacts of extreme weather events due to climate change, which disproportionately disadvantage women and girls, are rooted in systemic gender-based discrimination and societal expectations. The complex intersection of identity and socioeconomic factors, such as gender, disability, geographic location, indigenous status, income level and educational background, places women and girls facing intersectional discrimination at a greater risk of being impacted by the adverse effects of climate change over a prolonged period of time. A just transition towards green and blue economies necessitates sufficient investment in gender-responsive public services, social protection, healthcare systems and legal reforms that are adaptive to climate change and its gendered effects.[2]

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1   Just transitions in the Global Accelerator are defined broadly to cover the transitions to towards the green, digital and care economies. See United Nations, "Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions", web page. Available at: https://www.unglobalaccelerator.org/ (accessed 29 July 2024).

2   UN-Women, "The climate-care nexus: addressing the linkages between climate change and women's and girls' unpaid care, domestic and communal work", working paper (New York, 2023).

(a) Empowering women and girls to pursue climate justice

While women and girls experience climate change in diverse ways and bear its consequences disproportionately, they are excluded from decision-making in many contexts. In the pursuit of climate justice, actions are needed to recognize women and girls' rights and accord rightful value to their labour and knowledge (recognition); share equitably economic resources and opportunities (redistribution); make collective decisions with the inclusion of all voices (representation); and acknowledge historical injustices, being accountable to past and future generations (reparation).[3] Countries need to recognize the role of women and girls as agents of change, by integrating their voices and perspectives into decision-making at all levels and relying on their leadership to develop and implement gender-responsive climate mitigation and adaptation policies.[4]

Governments urgently need to reform existing legislative and institutional frameworks that continue to limit women's access to land tenure, inheritance rights and access to natural resources, and restrict their mobility and access to essential information and services. If unchanged, these legislative and institutional barriers will compromise the ability of women and girls to cope with the direct consequences of climate change, such as livelihood loss, increased scarcity of natural resources, food insecurity and more frequent extreme weather events as well as disasters. Moreover, resources need to be earmarked within climate financing instruments to support women and girls to recover from livelihood and income loss due to climate change, start and grow low-carbon, climate-resilient livelihoods and businesses, and access climate-resilient social protection.

(b) Addressing the nexus between climate, care, security and gender

In promoting gender-responsive climate action, the climate-care nexus deserves particular focus. Climate change and environmental degradation often lead to increased unpaid care, domestic and communal responsibilities. When equipped with intentional gender-responsive measures, climate change mitigation and adaptation, along with efforts to build a low-carbon and climate-resilient economy, provide an opportunity to build and improve sustainable infrastructure that helps to reduce women and girls'

unpaid care and domestic work while improving their health and socioeconomic outcomes. It can contribute to creating decent jobs and economic opportunities that enable women and girls to be active participants in the green and blue economies.

Equal attention must be given to the interlinkages between climate change and peace and security, as well as their gender implications. The impacts of climate change exacerbate socioeconomic, political and environmental pressures, which amplify threats to peace and security with disproportionate impacts on women and girls due to their frequent association with national resources collection, usage and management. Conversely, conflicts and crises weaken communities' capacities to adapt to the increased frequency of hazards and changing conditions regarding the availability and distribution of natural resources.[5] In their climate change mitigation and adaptation actions, countries need to strategically leverage women and girls' unique knowledge and skills to facilitate sustainable natural resource management, build climate-resilient communities, and sustain peace and stability. Concerted and coordinated efforts across sectors, involving governments, grassroots women's organizations and other actors and stakeholders engaged in climate mitigation and adaptation, peace and security and women's empowerment agendas.

8.2.2 Promoting ethical, inclusive digital ecosystems for gender equality

Digital transformation has taken our societies well beyond connectivity, into a new era of technological transformation, including artificial intelligence (AI) that encompasses a broad range of technologies. Digital and emerging technologies present new economic and educational opportunities, and make possible new solutions for environmental protection, climate-resilient infrastructure and public services, smart communities, and universal design-based accessibility. Yet the digital transition also inherits, and possibly intensifies, pre-existing inequalities by further concentrating economic and societal powers in the hands of those who control latest technologies. Most, if not all countries in the region have elevated digital development as one of their top policy-setting agendas as they seek to turn the digital divide into a digital dividend.[6] To harness this strategic momentum for gender equality, action has to go beyond closing gender divides in digital connectivity and skills and promote ethical, inclusive and gender-responsive digital innovation and their use.

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3   UN-Women, *Feminist Climate Justice: A Framework for Action* (New York, 2023).

4   UNFCCC, "Dimensions and examples of the gender-differentiated impacts of climate change, the role of women as agents of change and opportunities for women, Synthesis report by the secretariat", FCCC/SBI/2022/7 (Bonn, 2022).

5   UNEP and others, *Gender, Climate & Security: Sustaining Inclusive Peace on the Frontlines of Climate Change* (Nairobi, 2020).

6   ESCAP/CICTSTI/2022/L.1.

(a) Strengthening governance of digital and emerging technologies, including AI

Governments need to act urgently to adopt legislations and take steps to promote the common good, protect privacy and personal data, and take appropriate actions and preventive measures against abusive uses of digital and emerging technologies, including AI. Given the increasing use of digital and emerging technologies in political, social, economic and cultural activities and the delivery of public services, regulatory frameworks should give specific account of non-discrimination and equity in access to such technologies and information, with necessary measures to prevent the potential marginalization and exclusion of population groups who face challenges in accessing and using digitalized information and services. These regulatory frameworks could only be effective if accompanied with clear accountability, effective due diligence, oversight and remedy mechanisms, as well as collaboration with the private sector and civil society. Investment in training and capacity building of policy makers, judges and other legal professionals is urgently needed to ensure these regulatory frameworks and others concerning human rights in all respects are effectively implemented both online and offline.

The commitment of the private sector is important in developing, disseminating and guiding the uses of digital and emerging technologies, as well as information, content and services premised on such technologies.[7] Digital technology companies, developers and social media platforms are strongly encouraged to develop industry accountability frameworks, in consultation with governments and other stakeholders including users of diverse backgrounds. Such corporate accountability frameworks should help ensure that digital and emerging technologies such as AI are inclusive and privacy-respecting by design. Such frameworks can help increase transparency around the systems and processes of digital and emerging technologies to inform decision making by policy makers and users, mandate risk assessments, define corporate responsibilities and social safeguards standards. Digital technology companies, developers and social media platforms can ensure the provision of training on online safety, cybersecurity and other safeguards to their users, and help establish safe, secure and accessible reporting mechanisms for users and their advocates to report potential violation of relevant laws and standards and provide access to redress.[8]

Across regulatory frameworks, corporate accountability frameworks and industry actions, a strong gender and social inclusion perspective is needed to account for the human rights and the interest of women and girls, including the most socioeconomically marginalized groups among them. Vulnerable groups, including children, that interact with digital and emerging technologies should be proactively engaged in discussions about relevant policies and governance frameworks. Particularly, digital governance dialogues and frameworks need to address the critical issues related to combatting all forms of violence, including sexual and gender-based violence, hate speech and discrimination, mis- and disinformation, cybercrimes, cyberbullying and child sexual exploitation and abuse, that occurs through or is amplified by the use of digital technology. Moreover, as data have become critical resources in the digital age and are generated and stored in ever-greater volumes as a result of digital technology developments, digital governance frameworks need to address privacy, safety and integrity in data flows, management and use.[9] In particular, given the increasing use of digital platforms and AI for the delivery of health services, Governments should put forward prudent policy measures regarding health, especially reproductive health data with respect to women and girls' bodily integrity and rights.[10]

(b) Investing in digital innovation for gender equality

Another crucial dimension of ethical, inclusive digital innovation is to ensure technologies do not exacerbate existing inequalities and that individuals, businesses and societies, regardless of background and size, can equally benefit from digitalization and thrive in the digital economy.

Countries in the region need to make gender-smart investments to close gender divides in digital connectivity, digital literacy and skills, and the talent pools and workforces that design, develop, use and govern emerging technologies, including AI. It is equally important to consider policy incentives for companies and employers in sectors that are increasingly reliant on digital and emerging technologies, including AI, to hire women and increase women's representation in technical, professional and leadership positions in these sectors.

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7   Ibid.
8   See A/RES/78/213, A/78/L.49 and United Nations Internet Governance Forum 2023, "Internet Governance Forum – Kyoto IGF Messages", Kyoto, 8 to 12 October 2023, available at: https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/300/26576 (accessed on 19 August 2024).
9   United Nations Internet Governance Forum 2023, "Internet Governance Forum – Kyoto IGF Messages", Kyoto, 8 to 12 October 2023, available at: https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/300/26576 (accessed on 19 August 2024).
10   Anita Gurumurthy and Nandini Chami (IT for Change), "Innovation to Tackle Gender Inequality: A Back-to-Basics Roadmap", expert paper prepared for UN-Women Expert Group Meeting in October 2022. Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/EP.6_Anita%20Gurumurthy.pdf.

Countries in the region need to make strategic investment in digital public infrastructure that could enable women-owned businesses to benefit from and thrive in the booming digital economy. Such digital public goods may include public data pools and datasets, public data exchange protocols, cloud infrastructure, digital payment means as well as other digital business means and platforms using emerging technologies which are foundational to the digital economy. Essential to such investment is making sure that women-owned businesses, especially women-owned MSMEs and digital start-ups can access, afford and leverage productivity and efficiency advantages of these digital and emerging technologies. Preferential terms and technical assistance may be extended to women producers, platform workers and microentrepreneurs for the use of digital marketplaces, considering the market disadvantages they often face. Governments should deploy public financing investment, and facilitate collaboration between digital technology companies, developers and platforms and women's collectives and business networks.[11]

Countries can leverage digital and emerging technologies to make essential public services accessible and safe. The use of digital and technological innovation in public service delivery would be especially meaningful in remote and hard-to-reach communities, for persons with disabilities and for women and girls threatened by sexual and gender-based violence, whose reporting and help-seeking are hindered by safety concerns and economic and cultural barriers. Intelligently deployed, digital and emerging technologies could provide a safe space for women and girls to express their voices and opinions about sensitive issues, including during public emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, it is crucial to be mindful of various barriers to connectivity, access and user literacy that these groups face, especially older women and poor and less educated women and girls. Only when coupled with intentional investments to close gender digital divides and gender-responsive, inclusive safeguard measures, would digitalized public service delivery not lead to exclusion. Besides, digital service delivery should not entirely replace traditional service delivery means. These remain necessary for meeting diversified access needs and patterns of different population groups.

(c) Improving cross-border, multi-stakeholder cooperation on digital governance and innovation

The uses and impact of digital and emerging technologies, including AI, transcend national borders. Close collaboration and partnerships must be fostered at the regional and global levels, with particular attention paid to assisting developing countries in building and capitalizing on the digital dividend while navigating emerging challenges. Existing platforms such as the United Nations Internet Governance Forum should be leveraged to provide multi-stakeholder expertise and facilitate global multi-stakeholder dialogue and cooperation. A global governance mechanism that is founded upon dialogues among countries, with sufficient flexibility for adaptation in different national and local contexts, and upon collaboration among governments, the private sector, civil society and academia is urgently needed in the context of rapidly evolving digital and emerging technologies.

The respective responsibilities and accountability of all parties in the digital governance life cycle need to be further clarified. Policy discussion, development and analysis concerning emerging technologies such as AI, which are currently focused in and on the Global North, need to more thoroughly account for the situations and solutions needed in and for the Global South.[12] These policies and governance frameworks need to be translated into actionable measures and effective implementation, with sound mechanisms to oversee and track the implementation and impact. Potential unintended effects of relevant regulations and policies, including those related to transparency, safety, privacy and the protection of expression and other rights, also need to be monitored and further understood.

Countries, digital technology companies and social media platforms, the civil society and other stakeholders in Asia and the Pacific are strongly encouraged to make concerted investment in actions recommended in existing regional and global frameworks, such as the Action Plan for Implementing the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Initiative, 2022 – 2026.[13] This is particularly relevant to those with the vision and objective to leave no one behind, and to support the implementation of the Plan of Action of the World Summit on the Information Society[14] and the United Nations Secretary-General's Initiative on "Our Common Agenda", its seventh commitment on "improving digital cooperation" in particular.[15]

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11   Ibid.

12   United Nations Internet Governance Forum 2023, "Internet Governance Forum – Kyoto IGF Messages", Kyoto, 8 to 12 October 2023, available at: https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/300/26576 (accessed on 19 August 2024).

13   ESCAP/CICTSTI/2022/L.1.

14   United Nations and International Telecommunication Unions, "World Summit on the information Society: Plan of Action", document WSIS-03/GENEVA/DOC/5-E, 12 December 2003. Available at: https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/official/poa.html (accessed on 19 August 2024).

15   United Nations, "Our Common Agenda: Policy Brief 5: A Global Digital Compact – an Open, Free and Secure Digital Future for All" (New York, 2023).

Throughout the efforts to foster global, multi-stakeholder collaboration on the governance of digital and emerging technologies including AI, special attention should be paid to avoiding fragmentation of efforts and employing an inclusive approach. It is necessary to build and share relevant technical, social and legal expertise for the development, distribution, impact assessment and governance of digital and emerging technologies, including AI, to ensure the safeguard of human rights, the promotion of gender equality and social inclusion, and the responsible use of such technologies.[16] To ensure the employment of gender and inclusion lenses in these actions, the participation and leadership of women and girls in processes – from design, development, distribution, use and governance of digital and emerging technologies – is of utmost importance.

8.2.3 Investing in the care economy for broad-based empowerment of women and girls

Unpaid care and domestic responsibilities constitute one of the biggest contributors to gender gaps in educational, economic, social and political participation and undermines women and girls' well-being. It leaves them systematically disadvantaged. These gaps and challenges begin at a young age, increase during women's prime reproductive and economically productive years, and continue into the old age. In many cases, older women continue to care for young children, ageing spouses and other family members. This has led to a large number of the region's older women living without income security or sufficient care support. Public health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change-induced resource depletion and increasingly frequent disasters intensify women and girls' unpaid care and domestic responsibilities, at the expense of their own physical and mental health and their participation in education, employment and other income-generating activities. Holistic investment in the care economy is critically important in Asia and the Pacific.

(a) Making care-sensitive, gender-responsive investment in social, economic policies and climate action

As governments create policies to adapt to demographic changes, pandemics and climate emergencies, it is important that these policies are designed with the objective to recognize, reduce and redistribute the enormous unpaid care and domestic work burden borne by women and girls. The design of social protection schemes needs to account for the care needs of families and individuals, such as children, persons with disabilities and older persons, and the

costs of care. Social protection schemes should provide adequate benefits to allow access to affordable and quality care services and compensate for the loss of income for unpaid caregivers who are often women. In particular, contributory social protection schemes should consider mechanisms to address women's career interruptions due to reproductive activities and care responsibilities. Such interruptions often result in discontinuity or low levels of contributions in contributory schemes, compromising women's eligibility and access to adequate level of benefits. Labour market and workplace policies and measures, often incentivized by the attempt to mitigate low fertility rates and shrinking labour forces, should bring in gender perspectives to support women in mitigating the impacts of unpaid care and domestic responsibilities and be mindful of the unintended consequence of reinforcing women's roles as carers. Moreover, investments in affordable, accessible and quality paid care services are equally necessary to redistribute care work between the family, the State and the market. These investments are promising for creating formal and decent job opportunities in the care sector, particularly benefiting women who are overrepresented among care workers. Infrastructure investments aimed at climate adaptation, as well as sustainable energy and water solutions, should incorporate care-responsive considerations to reduce women's time spent on resource collection and management.

(b) Shifting the paradigm of care

Developing the care economy requires significant resources allocation to be mobilized from public financing, private capital, climate and social impact investments and bonds and other innovative financing schemes. To achieve this, the paradigm of care must be shifted from understanding care as a private responsibility to be provided within the family or a welfare service to acknowledging it as a social responsibility and a public good of social and economic significance. Governments, academia, the private sector and regional and international organizations need to take concerted action to improve the generation and quality of time-use and other care-related data and statistics and advocate for the use of such data and statistics in socioeconomic analysis. Additionally, the fundamental norms that lead to unequal labour division between men and women must be transformed through both formal laws and policy incentives, such as statutory paternity and parental leaves shared by both parents. Informal norm changing processes should be embedded in family education, schooling and public education, with a particular focus on the engagement and mobilization of men and boys.

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16   See A/RES/78/213 and A/78/L.49, and United Nations Internet Governance Forum 2023, "Internet Governance Forum – Kyoto IGF Messages", Kyoto, 8 to 12 October 2023, available at: https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/300/26576 (accessed on 19 August 2024).

8.3 FOUNDATIONS FOR ACCELERATING PROGRESS: STRENGTHEN GENDER NORMS TRANSFORMATION, DATA INSIGHTS, FINANCING AND PARTNERSHIP MECHANISMS

To expedite progress in the priority areas presented above, countries in the region should employ proactive measures to tackle the entrenched gender social norms, close persisting gaps in gender data and statistics, promote gender-smart financing and foster innovative partnerships. Strengthening these underlying, cross-cutting areas provides the foundation for countries in the region to excel across all thematic areas concerning gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

8.3.1 Transforming gender social norms

Biased and harmful gender social norms underlie gender gaps and inequalities that women and girls experience across all dimensions of their life experiences. These gender norms contribute to enabling gender-based violence and stymying access to social protection. They undermine women and girls' sexual and reproductive health, their reproductive rights, and their access to education and skills training. Biased and harmful gender norms stop women and girls from fully participating and leading politically and deny them the ability to shape the global agenda related to the just and digital transition. Interacting with other norms that discriminate and/or exclude individual and groups by other identity factors, gender norms can lead to even higher levels of social exclusion of women and girls in all their variety. Those who have diverse sexual orientation and gender identity and those who are older, living with disabilities, from indigenous communities and are migrants often face extra discrimination. The impacts go beyond individual rights and experiences – including those of men and boys – to hinder economic and societal progress. These social norms penetrate the daily life and are passed on across generations through socialization in the home, at school, via the media and social media, in the workplace and the communities. They are perpetuated, reinforced and institutionalized through biased and discriminatory laws and policies. Therefore, transforming gender social norms has to be based upon progressive reforms in socialization, policies and institutions, and laws and regulatory frameworks – as the three levers of change to gender social norms.

(a) Socialization

People start to acquire gender norms, and the associated expectations and behaviours, from an early age through parental attitudes, education and social interactions through schools, workplaces, religious institutions, the media and social media. Challenging the socialization and internalization of gender norms often requires intentional reforms in content and practices of parenting, education in both formal and informal settings, religious activities, the media and social media. Typical contents and notions in these media that require radical changes are those that stereotype individuals' appearance, behaviours and perceptions, and social expectations about their roles, based on their sex. These stereotypes underestimate women and girls' capability, undervalue their work and normalize gender-based violence. While public education and community mobilization in various forms are necessary, these efforts must be institutionalized in order to achieve consistent, positive changes. Mandating gender and inclusion education in school curricula and regulating media and social media contents are extremely important for scrutinizing gender-based biases, stereotypes and discrimination, and fostering new, healthy gender social norms.

Engaging parents, educators, religious and community leaders, media and social media influencers – of different genders – in the actions is crucial. For instance, in India a school-based curriculum that engaged both boys and girls in classroom discussions about gender equality was found to result in more progressive gender attitudes. In Pakistan, an intervention that mobilized men's support for women's voting helped increase women voters' turnout as well as men's practical support to women's participation in voting. Another study in India suggests that social media can successfully reshape social gender norms and reduce the social acceptability of gender-based violence. To address negative portrayals of women and girls and gender bias in the media, including social media, 58 per cent of countries that responded to the online survey on the Beijing+30 review[17] reported having provided training to media professionals to encourage the creation and use of non-stereotypical, balanced and diverse images of women and girls in the media. The other most often reported actions included enacting, strengthening, and enforcing legal reforms to combat discrimination and/or gender bias in the media, including social media (53 per cent) and promoting the participation and leadership of women in the media (50 per cent).

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17   A total of 40 Asia-Pacific countries responded to the global survey on the Beijing+30 review as of 18 July 2024.

(b) Policy incentives and institutional support

Biased gender norms normalize discriminatory practices such as unequal labour division in the home, occupational segregation and gender hierarchies in workplace and religious practices. These discriminatory practices can reinforce behaviours and attitudes towards individuals and groups of different genders. Any attempt to confront these norms could face social sanctioning while obedience would be socially rewarded. Investment in gender-responsive public policies and institutions with deliberate objectives to shift the distribution of labour and resources within and outside the household can contribute to transforming discriminatory practices. For example, paternity or parental leave policies, coupled with access to affordable and quality care services, can incentivize men to share childcare responsibilities and enable more women to enter the labour force. Social protection that reaches women and girls can increase their bargaining power at home, boost their likelihood to stay in school and lower the likelihood of early marriage. Gender-responsive budgets help enforce policies and programmes in a gender-responsive manner across sectors.

(c) Proactive reform in laws and regulatory frameworks

In some situations, biased gender norms are institutionalized in laws and policies as well as institutional mechanisms. This is evident in laws and policies restricting women and girls' mobility and their participation in education, economic and political life that continue to exist in many parts of the world. While removing these discriminatory laws and regulatory frameworks is important, legislative reforms must more proactively strengthen laws and regulatory frameworks that explicitly and deliberately support gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in order to transform gender norms. For example, laws against gender-based violence are needed which clearly define unacceptable behaviours, penalties for perpetrators, and the rights and redress for victim/survivors can foster a zero-tolerance culture. Laws that stipulate gender and equity quotas and reserved seats can lead to a tangible increase in women's representation in politics and leadership, and thus contribute to building the credibility of women as leaders, while gradually changing misconceptions of women's leadership capacity.

Tackling gender norms in socialization, public policies and institutional settings, and regulatory frameworks are all important to change gender social norms. A single intervention is unlikely to change systemic problems that are deeply entrenched in societies and cultures. A systematic approach is therefore needed to enable these change levers to interact and be mutually reinforcing. A change of gender norms must be at the heart of policy initiatives. For instance, shared parental leave should include a mandatory quota of leave to be taken by fathers to encourage a break with the norm of mothers bearing the full responsibility of childcare. Promoting women and girls' agency and leadership is essential in any intervention, especially those aimed at transforming gender norms. Removing literacy, economic and social barriers for women and girls is essential if women are to lead and take part in setting the agenda in the public and private sectors. Engaging men and boys is critical to transform gender norms. While men and boys often are privileged based on gender norms that perpetuate men's exercise of power over women, biased gender norms can harm men and boys as well, especially when they do not conform to norms of masculinity. Engaging men and boys, therefore, is essential to gender equality from a more diverse and inclusive social transformation perspective.

8.3.2 Bridging gaps in gender data and statistics

Gender data and statistics are critical for enabling robust gender analysis, progress monitoring, and impact assessment, which are necessary processes for evidence-based, gender-responsive policymaking and programming. Yet, significant gender data gaps persist across the Asia-Pacific region. An in-depth mapping of gender data availability in five Asia-Pacific countries during the period 2010–2020 revealed that 46 per cent of the 98 gender-relevant indicators of the SDGs were missing or lacked sex-disaggregation.[18] The proportion of indicators with sex-disaggregated data was at most 77 per cent across all six assessed domains, including health, education, economic opportunity, political participation, human security and the environment. Notably, the environment domain had the lowest proportion, with a mere 4 per cent at the national level.[19] A positive upward trend has been recorded in the availability of SDG statistics among ESCAP members and associate members in recent years. Yet in 2023, only 52 per cent of SDG indicators had two or more data points, while 39 per cent of the indicators lacked data altogether. Gender equality (Goal 5) continued to have the least available data in the region, with merely 16 per cent

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18 The 98 indicators were sourced from the list of SDG indicators or recommended by UN-Women to supplement the SDGs. Armenia, Bangladesh, Mongolia, the Philippines and Samoa were included in the study. See Open Data Watch, Data2X and ESCAP, "Bridging the gap: Mapping gender data availability in Asia and the Pacific", technical report (n.p., 2021).

19 Open Data Watch, Data2X and ESCAP, "Bridging the gap: Mapping gender data availability in Asia and the Pacific", technical report (n.p., 2021).

of indicators possessing sufficient information. Sex-disaggregated statistics were available for only 25 out of the 231 indicators to enable regional progress assessment.[20]

The COVID-19 pandemic has recently highlighted the consequence of the scarcity of sex-disaggregated data, which has limited a comprehensive assessment of the pandemic's gendered impacts and hindered the effectiveness of response and recovery efforts. Besides, data and statistics challenges in the region have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which regular data collection and generation in many countries were interrupted. In 2020, according to a survey that involved 23 Asia-Pacific countries, 40 per cent of the headquarter offices of national statistical offices (NSOs) in the region were fully or partially closed, more than half of them completely stopped field data collection involving face-to-face interviews, and nearly 75 per cent of them had to postpone fieldwork for planned censuses.[21]

Over the past five years, countries in the Asia-Pacific region have made efforts to strengthen gender data and statistics. Among the 40 Asia-Pacific governments that responded to the global survey on the Beijing+30 review, 45 per cent reported having established inter-agency coordination mechanisms on gender statistics, 43 per cent had legislated the development of gender statistics, 38 per cent reported using more gender-sensitive data in policy formulation and implementation, and 35 per cent had conducted new surveys to produce national baselines information on specialized topics. Going forward, participating governments recognized the continued need to invest in these actions. Investment and collaboration are urgently needed in the following regional priorities to fill the critical gaps in gender data and statistics:

(a) Prioritizing filling data and statistics gaps concerning existing and emerging regional priorities

The World Bank (WB) has proposed 13 areas for further research to close gender data gaps, including assets, care, climate change, conflict, crime and justice, entrepreneurship, environment, fiscal policy, gender-based violence, sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), social norms, technology, and work and employment.[22] While these areas are equally relevant and important to Asia and the Pacific, national statistical offices, academia, private-sector actors, regional and international organizations could further focus attention on regional priorities of closing gender data gaps. These include: (i) quality

data on care and its gendered, socioeconomic implications; (ii) quality data and statistics on sexual and reproductive health, including data to measure effective interventions which could be used to inform actions to accelerate progress in reducing maternal mortality that has stagnated over the last decade in the region; (iii) data on women's political leadership and influence, focusing not only on representation but also on the influence of women in power; (iv) data on the prevalence of female genital mutilation and cutting which is nearly non-existent in the region; and (v) measuring emerging issues such as technology-facilitated gender-based violence and gender implications of climate change and disasters, with special attention paid to experiences of groups who are often excluded in data collection such as adolescents, older women and others.

(b) Improving methods, standards and guidelines for measuring emerging and essential issues

The comparability and quality of gender data remain a challenge. National statistical offices, academia, regional and international organizations urgently need to increase research and technical consultations to inform the development of improved methods, international standards and guidelines for quality and comparable data collection, expanding data collection scales, and strengthening ethical and safety adherence. Such actions are especially needed in areas related to gender-based violence and emerging issues such as climate change and digitalization, including technology-facilitated sexual and gender-based violence. Moreover, innovative and diversified methods and means for continuing data collection during emergency situations need to be explored to ensure the availability of quality gender data to inform response actions.

(c) Ensuring that gender data and statistics account for intersectionality and power dynamics

Even where data exist, there are gaps in sufficient, comparable and high-quality data to account for the situations of different population groups. This can be partially ascribed to the lack of consistent, sufficient disaggregation of statistics by gender, age, race, ethnicity, disability, geographic location, migration status, income level, educational attainment and other identifiers. It is also due to the lack of intersectional analysis of data and statistics. Future data actions need to produce data that uncover the experiences and realities of those who have remained invisible in data. Data analysis needs to go beyond

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20 ESCAP, *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2024: Showcasing Transformative Actions* (United Nations publication, 2024).

21 ESCAP, UN DESA and the World Bank. "Monitoring the state of statistical operations under the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Asia-Pacific region, (July 2020). Available at: https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Statistical_operations_under_COVID-19_in_the_Asia-Pacific_region.pdf.

22 Anna Tabitha Bonfert et al., "Levering Gender Data to Accelerate Gender Equality", World Bank Group Gender Thematic Policy Notes Series, July 2023.

accounting for differences between women and men, and measure gender power dynamics, such as gender social norms, and the issue of stigmatization associated with gender-based violence, to illuminate hidden realities.

(d) Creating the demand for gender data and statistics

Gender data gaps exist not only because of limited data collection capacity but due to the lack of appetite to use data to address gender concerns across sectors. National statistical systems in the region generally have restricted capacities to analyse data and statistics with a gender lens and intersectional methodologies, and to disseminate and communicate data in an effective and accessible manner. Consequently, this constrains the interest and ability of governments, women's organizations, academia, media and other stakeholders to use gender data and statistics to inform policy- and decision-making, research, service provision and advocacy. In many countries, data users are largely disconnected from producers. While potential users may be unaware of the availability of gender data, producers often fail to meet the needs of clients beyond government entities. To increase the availability, accessibility and use of gender data, there is an urgent need to address political, institutional, financial and technical shortfalls that perpetuate data gaps, and to better connect data producers and users.

8.3.3 Boosting gender-smart financing

Achieving gender equality costs. It is projected to cost $7.6 trillion annually from 2023 to 2030 for all developing economies around the world to achieve eight key SDG indicators related to gender equality.[23] This represents a per capita annual cost of about $1,383 to reach gender quality in pivotal areas, such as eradicating poverty, alleviating hunger and supporting women's equal participation in society. Despite the urgent financial needs, the current government spending trajectory leaves a stark spending gap at $420 billion each year globally, with all developing economies counted. Upper-middle and high-income developing economies, and small island developing states (SIDS), face the largest annual gap relative to the total annual cost, at approximately 6 per cent of their total required funds.[24]

The agreed conclusions of the sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (2021), inter alia, state that significant investments are needed to close resources gaps for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls through the mobilization of adequate financial resources from all sources possible.[25] Efforts may include domestic and international resource mobilization and allocation, the full implementation of official development assistance (ODA) and combatting illicit financial flows. The importance of promoting the control, ownership, management and participation of women in the mobilization of adequate resources, capacity building and transfer of technology on mutually agreed terms, in order to enhance the effective use of such resources and technologies to enable gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, was also stressed.

Despite increasing consensus on the urgency of adequate resources allocation for gender equality, the actual allocation of funds remains marginal in the Asia-Pacific region, relative to the scale of interventions needed, and is at risk of being sidelined in face of other challenges. Among the 40 Asia-Pacific governments that responded to the global survey on the Beijing+30 review, 88 per cent reported having a valid national strategy or action plan for achieving gender equality. However, less than half (45 per cent) indicated that the national strategy or plan was costed and allocated with sufficient financial resources for the implementation. Half of the responding governments (50 per cent) had not tracked the proportion of their public budgets invested in the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. The economic fallouts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the global debt crisis threaten to further shrink the resources allocation for gender equality. A total of 21 responding governments reported having introduced fiscal consolidation or austerity measures over the past five years. Only four countries had assessed the potential impact of these measures on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls before putting them in place and one country assessed the impacts after relevant measures were put in place. There is a pressing need for countries to diversify financing schemes and invest more and better.

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23   The estimate is based on per capita cost assessed by a study of 48 developing economies, home to 68 per cent of people living in developing economies worldwide, and applied to all developing countries worldwide. The eight indicators covered in the cost estimate include SDG 1.1.1A15F (proportion of population below international poverty line (%), age 15+, female; SDG 1.3.1 (proportion of population covered by social assistance programs (%); SDG 2.1.2F (prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity, female (%); SDG 3.1.1 (maternal mortality rate); SDG 5.4.1 (proportion of time spent on unpaid care work (%), ratio female/male); SDG 5.5.1 (proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (% of total seats); SDG 5.5.2 (proportion of women in managerial positions – 13th ICLS(%); SDG 8.6.1 (proportion of youth not in education, employment or training – 13th ICLS (%). See UN Trade & Development (UNCTAD), The costs of achieving the SDGs: Gender quality (webpage). Available at: https://unctad.org/sdg-costing/gender-equality (accessed on 08 June 2024).

24   UN Trade & Development (UNCTAD), The costs of achieving the SDGs: Gender quality (webpage). Available at: https://unctad.org/sdg-costing/gender-equality (accessed on 08 June 2024).

25   E/CN.6/2021/L.3.

Member States and stakeholders in Asia and the Pacific may consider boosting gender-smart financing through the following recommended actions:

✚ Prioritize **gender-responsive budgeting** by establishing robust linkages between planning and budgeting processes, ensuring that gender considerations are integrated into all stages of the planning and budgeting cycle, from policy formulation to resource allocation and implementation as well as monitoring and evaluation.

✚ Develop gender-responsive **fiscal policies** that promote gender equality, address women's and girls' specific needs, and ensure an equitable distribution of resources. While countries have limited fiscal space, a change of mindset is in need to view spending on gender equality and the empowerment of women as investments for sustainable and better socioeconomic and environmental returns that would benefit all.

✚ Analyse the gender-differentiated impact of **revenue-raising policies** including through gender audits and by removing gender bias and discrimination in tax policies to ensure that tax revenues are raised and spent in ways that promote gender equality.

✚ Introduce gender-responsive **progressive taxation strategies** by designing tax policies that consider gender disparities in income, wealth and economic opportunities and redistribute wealth to benefit women and girls.

✚ Promote **sustainable and gender-inclusive debt instruments** such as social and sustainability-linked bonds and loans that have gender equality as a priority objective, as well as debt swaps that target specific gender equality goals. These are meant to finance projects that reduce gender inequalities and promote the empowerment of women.

✚ Increase the share of **climate and environment finance** that supports gender equality outcomes through multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder implementation, including dedicated budgets that focus on gender equality as a specific outcome of climate and environment investments.

✚ Create and finance targeted initiatives in **key sectors** such as agrifood systems that aim to increase women's empowerment and well-being through transformative solutions, enhancing the documentation of experiences, assessment of impacts, dissemination of knowledge and promotion of successful initiatives to scale.

✚ Strengthen the enabling environment for access to **capital**, including through micro credit institutions, venture capital, private equity and other blended finance[26] tools, to support women's entrepreneurship and women-owned micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs).

✚ Promote **private sector engagement** in national efforts that promote gender equality or similar initiatives that improve women's and girls' livelihoods, including through encouraging a shift in investment practices from investment for profit to **investment for impact**, as an alternative asset class that channels large-scale private capital to address social and environmental challenges, directing it towards gender equality and women's empowerment.

✚ Incorporate gender considerations in **foreign direct investment** (FDI) strategies and decision-making to amplify the positive impact of FDI on women in the host economies.

✚ Explore financing schemes to address critical funding gaps to address gender inequalities in **fragile states**, focusing not only on relief and recovery but also on actions that take a development approach to build socioeconomic resilience of people, including women and girls. In these contexts, a combination of overseas development assistance, philanthropic funding and private-sector resources may be considered to enable sufficient and timely funding allocations.

8.3.4 Fostering innovative partnerships

The increasing complex challenges that emerge from megatrends, namely climate change, demographic shifts and digital and technological transformation, require creative partnerships. At the sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (2021), Member States agreed to strengthen international cooperation, including North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation, to make progress in gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, noting the importance of these various cooperation mechanisms complementing each other.[27] Innovative partnerships should be tailored to make timely and proactive moves to seize opportunities presented in key transitions associated with these megatrends.

The traditional roles and mindsets of and interactions among different stakeholders involved in the partnership landscape need to be adjusted or redefined. Governments should mainstream gender throughout governance systems and practices. They need to be proactive in formulating responsive strategies

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26 Blended finance refers to catalytic concessional capital from philanthropic and public sources that can be used alongside commercial capital to help overcome market failures and address constraints for potential projects with high development impact and uncertain commercial returns. Blended finance tools including loan, bonds, equity and debt-sharing facilities can mobilize more capital for women-owned businesses which are especially important to emerging and developing economies. See IMF, *Closing the Gender Finance Gap through the Use of Blended Finance*, (Washington, D.C., 2022).

27 E/CN.6/2021/L.3.

and policies to capitalize on emerging sectors while preventing them from widening pre-existing inequalities. There needs to be more nuanced understanding of where and how the power of **the private sector** can be best utilized to accelerate the implementation, for the benefit of women and girls as well as population groups who tend to gain less from growth and development. The contribution by the private sector has to be based on meaningful partnerships and incentives beyond corporate social responsibility and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. **Civil society stakeholders, including women's CSOs and youth organizations**, have been instrumental in prioritizing gender equality and women's empowerment on the development agenda, delivering services to women and girls in need, and mobilizing communities alongside government entities.

Where institutional gaps exist, their roles and contributions are particularly important. An open and pluralistic civic space needs to be maintained as it is critical for CSOs' independent functioning and advocacy. CSOs need to be supported and empowered to communicate and collaborate more strategically and effectively with other actors within Government and the private sector, as well as the general public, to fulfil their role in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment.

Partnership strategies may be curated to facilitate transformative actions. These may include:

✚ Policy stimulus, public procurement and various financing arrangements (e.g., sovereign and non-sovereign loans, development finance, development impact bonds, social impact bonds, and foreign direct investment) channelled to support the sectors involved in the green, digital and care economies should be tied to specific objectives that increase women's workforce participation and decent work in the respective sectors, and gender-equal and inclusive outcomes.

✚ Private sector stakeholders need to be motivated to integrate gender equality and inclusion into their core principles for innovation, corporate accountability frameworks and industry actions. This means that the design of products, algorithms and other technological innovations need to be conscious about their differentiated impacts on different genders. To transform the currently gender-biased or at best gender-blind practices, systematic changes need to take place in higher education, professional training and professional standards for relevant occupations.

✚ Data collaboration needs to be broadened to include not only national statistical systems, academia and regional and international organizations but also civil society organizations and the private sector, including digital technology companies. Such partnerships should aim to diversify data sources, improve the availability, accessibility and quality of gender data across sectors through participatory processes, including the generation, analysis and uses of new forms of data. Consensus must be found on gender-responsive, ethical principles for data collection, analysis, dissemination, communication and use.

Partnerships and collaboration should be fostered to assist countries, where large gender gaps and inequalities exist, to promote inclusive socioeconomic development. Asia and the Pacific is a highly heterogeneous region in many dimensions. Progress towards the 2030 Agenda has been uneven across the region. Countries in special situations, including SIDS, least developed countries (LDCs) and landlocked developing countries (LLDCs), are most in need of support to make progress.[28] The regional Beijing+30 Review has found that each of the subregions (i.e., East and North-East Asia, North and Central Asia, the Pacific, South-East Asia and South and South-West Asia) has a unique set of achievements and challenges in the implementation of the BPfA. This means regional collaboration should aim to direct more financial and technical resources, as well as investments, to empower countries lagging furthest behind. Moreover, partnership and collaboration are needed to address problems most relevant to country specificities. Learning and exchange on good practices should be promoted among countries with similar contexts and situations, including by leveraging vehicles such as South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation.

8.4 CONCLUSION

Despite the many challenges and uncertainties faced by countries in the region today, there is some satisfaction to be drawn from the progress made and hope in the context of opportunities for gender equality that arise from digital and technological innovations. These provide potential solutions which were before out of reach. Some of the crises present "silver linings," incentivizing governments to invest more in strengthening resilience of the people, the economy and the environment. If seized, these opportunities have the potential to propel transformative change if gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is made an integral part of the development agenda. The geographical vastness; the cultural, religious and societal diversity; and the demographic dynamics of Asia and the Pacific require strategies and solutions to foster equitable development across subregions and countries to ensure just transitions for all.

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ANNEX 1: KEY DATA SOURCES USED IN THE ANALYSIS OF THE REPORT

This annex presents a descriptive overview of information submitted by ESCAP member States and data sources underpinning the analysis contained in the report. It covers all the databases which the drafting team have accessed for data calculation, recalculation and compilation to support the analysis across all chapters. It does not cover databases that are used in literature (e.g. publications, reports and papers) cited.

I.   Information submitted by ESCAP member States

In preparation for the thirtieth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 2025, the Economic and Social Council's resolution E/RES/2022/5 called for comprehensive national-level reviews by Member States of the progress made and challenges encountered in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and of the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly held in 2000.

In the Asia-Pacific region, 49 ESCAP member States were invited to participate in a survey and submit national review reports, focusing on the last five years (approximately 2020-2024). This review clustered the 12 critical areas of concern from the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action into six thematic areas and considers these dimensions in relation to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

To ensure the completion of the synthesis report sufficiently ahead of the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on the Beijing+30 Review, only surveys submitted by 18 July 2024 and national reports submitted by 15 August were included in the report.

1.   Online survey submissions

The online survey consisted of 52 substantive questions with multiple-choice answer-options aimed at capturing national priorities, achievements, challenges and progress across the 12 critical areas of concern, as well as developments related to data and institutions. Among the 49 ESCAP member States invited to participate in the survey, 40 responded by 18 July 2024.

The following 40 member States located in the Asia-Pacific region responded to the online survey by the cut-off date and were included in the survey analysis: Armenia, Australia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, Fiji, Georgia, India, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Japan, Kazakhstan, Kiribati, Kyrgyzstan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Marshall Islands, Micronesia (Federated States of), Nepal, New Zealand, Pakistan, Palau, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Türkiye, and Tuvalu.

2.   National report of the Beijing+30 review

In addition to the online survey, member States were called upon to produce and submit a narrative report capturing highlights, achievements, challenges, and progress across the 12 critical areas of concern, and progress on data and institutions in relation to the implementation of the BPfA at the national level since the previous review in 2019.

The following 37 ESCAP member States submitted a national report (as of 23 August 2024): Armenia, Australia, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, Fiji, Georgia, India, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Japan, Kazakhstan, Kiribati, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Micronesia (Federated States of), Nepal, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Palau, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Türkiye, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

The national reports are accessible through the ESCAP Asia and the Pacific Gender Portal. Available at: https://www.asiapacificgender.org/node/244.

II.   ESCAP databases

1.   ESCAP Statistical Database (ESCAP SDG Gateway Data Explorer)

The ESCAP Statistical Database provides a regional perspective on development issues in Asia and the Pacific, covering the 58 regional ESCAP member States and Associate Members. Data is compiled from United Nations agencies and programmes and other international sources of official statistics. The ESCAP Statistics Division produces regional and subregional aggregates, where applicable, which are presented in the database. For that purpose, data from all countries are downloaded and processed through the ESCAP statistical information system in order to calculate regional aggregates, including aggregates for other major parts of the world outside of the Asia-Pacific region for comparison purposes. Regional and/or subregional aggregates are calculated for pre-defined country groupings, typically as a sum or as a weighted average, provided that enough observed data are available at the country level. The mechanism to test the availability of data is set as follows:

- Social and environmental indicators: for any given year for which an aggregate is calculated, countries with observed values need to represent 2/3 of the population of the group.
- Economic indicators: countries with observed values need to represent 2/3 of the total GDP of the group.

The ESCAP Statistical Database is being compiled and maintained by the ESCAP Statistics Division. Available at: **https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/**.

TABLE A1   Key data obtained from the ESCAP Statistical Database for this report

CHAPTER	TOPIC	INDICATOR
2	Sexual and reproductive health	Laws and regulations that guarantee full and equal access to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education
2	Sexual and reproductive health	Nursing and midwifery personnel density
2	Sexual and reproductive health	Share of women aged 15 to 49 who make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use and reproductive healthcare
2	Sexual and reproductive health	Maternal mortality deaths per 100,000 live births
2	Sexual and reproductive health	Births attended by skilled health personnel (%)
2	Sexual and reproductive health	Family planning satisfied with modern methods
2	Education	Completion rate by educational level
3	Labour force participation	Labour force participation (ILO est) by sex, 15+
3	Youth Not in Employment Education or Training	Youth not in education, employment or training, male and female (aged 15–24)
3	Pay gap	Average hourly earnings; all occupations, by sex
3	Informal employment	Informal employment in total employment, by sex
3	Informal employment	Informal employment in non-agricultural employment, by sex
3	Informal employment	Informal employment in agricultural employment, by sex
3	Unpaid care and domestic work	Time spent on unpaid domestic chores and care work, 15+, by sex
4	Violence against women	Legal frameworks on gender equality
4	Intimate partner violence	Ever-partnered women and girls subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months, by age group
4	Child marriage	Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 15 and 18
5	Leadership and decision-making: legislatives	Seats held by women in national parliaments

5	Leadership and decision-making: local government	Proportion of elected seats held by women in deliberative bodies of local government
5	Leadership and decision-making: Managerial positions	Proportion of women in managerial positions, including senior and middle management
7	Access to land	Secure rights over agricultural land, by sex
7	Access to land	Legal framework on equal rights to land ownership

2. ESCAP Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) Platform

The ESCAP LNOB Platform helps understand how different circumstances interact to create unequal access to basic opportunities through Classification and Regression Tree (CART) and Dissimilarity Index (D index) analyses using data from nationally representative household surveys such as Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (2009-2020). Results are available for up to 30 countries[1] across Asia and the Pacific in 2009-2022 period, examining inequalities in SDGs for 16 indicators covering 8 SDGs over time. Available at: https://lnob.unescap.org/.

TABLE A2 **Key data from the ESCAP Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) Platform used in this report**

CHAPTER	TOPIC	INDICATOR
2	Education	Furthest left behind in secondary enrolment completion
2	Education	Furthest left behind in early childhood education
2	Digital skills	Furthest left behind in mobile phone ownership and internet access
2	Sexual and reproductive health	Furthest left behind in skilled birth attendance

3. ESCAP Incheon Strategy Indicators Database

This database presents information on the core indicators of the Incheon Strategy to "Make the Right Real" for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific, based on responses to the ESCAP surveys on the final review of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2013–2022, as well as secondary desk research. Available at: https://www.maketherightreal.net/data.

TABLE A3 **Data used from the Incheon Strategy Indicators Database**

CHAPTER	TOPIC	INDICATOR
5	National women's machineries	Representation of women with disabilities in national machinery for gender equality and women's empowerment
5	National women's machineries	Representation of women with disabilities in national coordination mechanisms on disability

III.   United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

SDG Global Database

The SDG Global Database provides access to data on more than 210 SDG indicators for countries, areas or regions across the globe. The global database for SDG data is maintained by the UN Statistics Division. The UN SDG regions and subregions are based on the M.49 statistical standard and includes all 58 ESCAP members and associate members located in Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). Available at: https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal.

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1   Country coverage varies depending on the indicator. For example, while secondary education covers 30 countries, the indicator skilled birth attendance cover 28 countries, and early childhood education and mobile phone ownership cover 22 countries.

TABLE A4   Data from the SDG Global Database

CHAPTER	TOPIC	INDICATOR
2	Sexual and reproductive health	Demand for family planning satisfied by any modern method
2	Sexual and reproductive health	Adolescent fertility rate (live births per 1,000 women aged 15–19)
7	Access to food	Prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity among population aged 15 or above, by sex
7	Access to energy	Proportion of population with primary reliance on clean fuels and technology (%)
7	Access to energy	Proportion of population with access to electricity and clean fuels and technology

IV.   United Nations Development Programme

The Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI) tracks people's attitudes in the following dimensions and indicators. Political dimension indicators include: 1) women having the same rights as men is essential for democracy; 2) men make better political leaders than women do. Educational dimension indicators include: 1) university is more important for men than for women. Economic dimension indicators include: 1) men should have more right to a job than women; 2) men make better business executives than women do. Physical integrity dimension indicators include: 1) proxy for beliefs about intimate partner violence (it is justifiable for a man to beat his wife); 2) proxy for beliefs about reproductive rights (abortion is never justifiable). The GSNI is calculated using data from the World Values Survey which employs questionnaires that assess social, political, economic and cultural values and norms. The data for 2023 GSNI update used the latest available data as of 12 January 2023. For more information about the methodology and the data used, please refer to "Technical note: Gender Social Norms Index", available at: https://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/publications/additional-files/2023-06/gsni_2023_technical_note.pdf.

V.   International Labour Organization databases

1.   ILO STAT, ILO modelled estimates database

The ILO modelled estimates series provides a complete set of internationally comparable labour statistics, including both nationally reported observations and imputed data for countries with missing data. The imputations are produced through a series of econometric models maintained by the ILO. The ILO modelled estimates are generally derived for 189 countries, disaggregated by sex and age as appropriate. For selected indicators, an additional disaggregation by rural/urban areas is performed. (Country-level estimates are not published for the informal employment and jobs gap indicators, for which only regional aggregates are available.)

Estimates for countries with very limited labour market information have a high degree of uncertainty. Hence, estimates for countries with limited nationally reported data should not be considered as "observed" data, and great discretion needs to be applied when using these data for analysis, especially at the country level. Available at: https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/.

TABLE A5   Data from ILO STAT, ILO modelled estimates database

CHAPTER	TOPIC	INDICATOR
3	Informal employment	Informal employment rate (% of employment)
3	Jobs gap	Jobs gap rate by sex (%) (annual)
3	Labour force participation	Prime-age labour force participation rate by sex and household type
3	Occupational segregation	Female share of employment in STEM
3	Income gap	Gender income gap, ratio of women's to men's labour income
3	Youth Not in Employment Education or Training	Share of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) by sex and country income group

2.   ILO World Social Protection Database

The World Social Protection Database collects, stores and disseminates comparable statistical data on social security worldwide. Data compilation on social protection is mainly driven by the administrative data received from the governments through SSI questionnaire. After the administrative data are validated, SDG indicators and others are computed. The latest methods, dataset and reports on social protection statistics, the results of impact assessments and applications of other tools are available at: https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/WSPDB.action?id=41.

TABLE A6   **Data from the ILO World Social Protection Database used in the report**

CHAPTER	TOPIC	INDICATOR
2	Social protection	Percentage of population legally covered by at least one social protection benefit, by country
2	Social protection	Percentage of children (0–15) and (0–18) covered by child benefit, by country
2	Social protection	Percentage of women giving birth receiving maternity cash benefits, by country
2	Social protection	Percentage of population covered by pension schemes, by country and by sex
2	Social protection	Percentage of population covered by pension schemes, by country and by sex
2	Social protection	Percentage of working-age population actively contributing to a pension scheme, by country and by sex
2	Social protection	Percentage of persons with severe disabilities receiving a disability benefit, by country
2	Social protection	Population covered by a social health scheme, by country
2	Social protection	Government expenditure on social protection (excluding health) and on health
3	Social protection	Percentage of workers unemployed who receive support through an unemployment protection scheme, by country
3	Social protection	Percentage of workers covered by work-related injury insurance, by country

VI.   Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) databases

IPU Parline Database

Parline is the global reference source for data on national parliaments. The Parline database contains around 600 fields on the structure, composition and functioning of parliament, as well as the results of parliamentary elections. Data in Parline is gathered from national parliaments through a network of Parline Correspondents. Parline is the official source of data for UN SDG indicators 5.5.1(a) on women in national parliaments and 16.7.1(a) on leadership positions held by women and youth. Available at: https://data.ipu.org/.

TABLE A7   **Data from IPU's Parline database**

CHAPTER	TOPIC	INDICATOR
5	Leadership and decision-making: legislatives	Percentage of women in lower or single houses of parliaments (as of 1 April 2024)
5	Leadership and decision-making: legislatives	Electoral quota for women
5	Leadership and decision-making: legislatives	Share of women speakers of parliament
5	Leadership and decision-making: legislatives	Share of women in select parliamentary committees

VII.   United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction

Sendai Framework Monitor

The Sendai Framework Monitor is an online tool that captures self-reported (by member States) progress data against a set of 38 Sendai Framework indicators towards the seven Sendai Framework global targets. The indicators measure progress and determine global trends in the reduction of risk and losses.

TABLE A8   Data from the Sendai Framework Monitor

CHAPTER	TOPIC	INDICATOR
7	Disaster risk reduction	Disaster related mortality
7	Disaster risk reduction	Population affected by disasters and disaster related mortality

VIII.   United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

dataUNODC

The UNODC database provides global statistical series on crime, criminal justice, drug trafficking and prices, drug production, and drug use. Available at: https://dataunodc.un.org/.

TABLE A9   Data from dataUNODC

CHAPTER	TOPIC	INDICATOR
4	Trafficking in persons	Number of total victims/survivors and victims/survivors of trafficking for sexual exploitation detected per 100,000 population
5	Leadership and decision-making: judiciaries	Share of women among judges and magistrates

IX.   World Health Organization

WHO's World Health Data Hub is a comprehensive digital platform for global health data. To specific databases are used in this report, including the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Policy Portal and the UHC Service Coverage Index. Available at: https://data.who.int/.

TABLE A10   Key data used from the WHO World Health Data Hub

CHAPTER	TOPIC	INDICATOR	DATABASE
4	Violence against women	Explicitly criminalizing marital rape	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Policy Portal
2	Health	Universal health coverage index	UHC Service Coverage Index

X.   World Bank databases

1.   Women, Business and the Law Database

The dataset offers benchmarks for global progress toward gender equality and includes Women, Business and the Law 2.0 which covers 190 economies and eight topics relevant to women's economic participation. Women, Business and the Law 2.0 introduces a new framework for measuring the implementation gap. It analyzes laws — de jure — and examines the existence of frameworks supporting implementation of the law and gauges experts' opinions on the outcome of the law for women — de facto. Women, Business and the Law 2.0 introduces two new indicators – Safety and Childcare – and revises other ongoing indicators. Available at: https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl-data.

TABLE A11 **Data used from the World Bank's Women Business and the Law Database**

CHAPTER	TOPIC	INDICATOR	DATABASE
2	Maternity protection	Legislation prohibiting the dismissal of pregnant workers	World Bank Women, Business and the Law 2.0
3	Entrepreneurship	Legislation prohibiting discrimination in access to credit	World Bank Women, Business, and the Law 2.0
3	Entrepreneurship	Legal constraints to women's ability to start and run a business	World Bank Women, Business, and the Law 2.0
3	Entrepreneurship	Gender-sensitive provisions in laws related to public procurement	World Bank Women, Business, and the Law 2.0
4	Violence against women	Legislation that addresses domestic violence, sexual harassment, child marriage and femicide	World Bank Women, Business and the Law 2.0
5	Leadership and decision-making: Managerial positions	Legal gender quota for corporate boards	World Bank Women, Business, and the Law 2.0

2. World Bank Enterprise Surveys and Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative (We-Fi)

Other sources of World Bank data used in the report includes data from the World Bank Enterprise Survey Data on the share of firms with any women participation in ownership, available at: https://www.enterprisesurveys.org/en/enterprisesurveys; as well as data from the World Bank's Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative (We-Fi) Database on the share of women-owned businesses, available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/entrepreneurship/gender.

XI. Disability Data Initiative (DDI)

The Disability Data Initiative (DDI) provides analyses of disability data to help advance the rights of persons with disabilities and sustainable human development for all. Using national census and household survey data, it provides a systematic analysis of the disability questions in national censuses and household surveys globally; and indicators disaggregated across disability status for countries with census or household survey data that have internationally comparable disability questions. Available at: https://disabilitydata.ace.fordham.edu/result-tables/

TABLE A12 **Data used from the Disability Data Initiative**

CHAPTER	TOPIC	INDICATOR
2	Poverty	Multidimensional poverty headcount ratio, by sex and disability status

XII. OECD Family Database

The database brings together information from various national and international databases, both within the OECD (see related OECD databases) and external organizations. The database currently includes 70 indicators grouped under four main dimensions: (i) structure of families, (ii) labour market position of families, (iii) public policies for families and children and (iv) child outcomes. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/social/family/database.htm.

TABLE A13 **Data used from the OECD Family Database**

CHAPTER	TOPIC	INDICATOR
2	Maternity protection	Parents' use of parental leave

ANNEX 2: COMPOSITION OF REGIONAL AND SUBREGIONAL GROUPINGS

This annex presents the varying regional groupings for "Asia and the Pacific", as well as subregions within "Asia and the Pacific", as defined by different United Nations entities cited as the sources of data in this report. Other regions than Asia and the Pacific may also be listed if they contain a country or territory that is a member or associate member to ESCAP. For statistical purposes, data used to examine situations in the ESCAP region cover 58 members and associate members located in the geographic region of Asia and the Pacific, excluding France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America which are also members to ESCAP. These 58 ESCAP members and associate members are listed under section A below.

A.   Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)

TABLE A14   ESCAP subregional groupings

ESCAP SUBREGIONS	MEMBER OR ASSOCIATE MEMBER
East and North-East Asia	China
	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
	Hong Kong, China
	Japan
	Macao, China
	Mongolia
	Republic of Korea
South-East Asia	Brunei Darussalam
	Cambodia
	Indonesia
	Lao People's Democratic Republic
	Malaysia
	Myanmar
	Philippines
	Singapore
	Thailand
	Timor-Leste
	Viet Nam
Pacific	Australia
	New Zealand
	Fiji
	New Caledonia
	Papua New Guinea
	Solomon Islands
	Vanuatu
	Kiribati
	Marshall Islands
	Micronesia (Federated States of)
	Nauru
	Northern Mariana Islands
	Palau
	Guam
	French Polynesia

Pacific	Cook Islands
	Niue
	Tonga
	Tuvalu
	American Samoa
	Samoa
North and Central Asia	Armenia
	Azerbaijan
	Georgia
	Kazakhstan
	Kyrgyzstan
	Tajikistan
	Turkmenistan
	Uzbekistan
	Russian Federation
South and South-West Asia	Afghanistan
	Bangladesh
	Bhutan
	India
	Sri Lanka
	Maldives
	Nepal
	Pakistan
	Iran (Islamic Republic of)
	Türkiye

B.   United Nations Statistics Division: SDG Indicators – Regional Groupings used in Report and Statistical Annex

The United Nations SDG regional groupings include 58 ESCAP members and associate members in the Asia-Pacific region. Fourteen of these countries or territories are grouped under Central and Southern Asia SDG region, 18 under the Eastern and South-Eastern Asia SDG region, 21 under the Oceania, Australia and New Zealand SDG region, 4 under the Northern Africa and Western Asia SDG region, and 1 under the Europe and Northern America SDG region. This classification follows the M.49 statistical standard (https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49).

The composition of the United Nations SDG regional and subregional groupings is available at: https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/regional-groups/.

C.   Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

FAO uses different regional groupings in different reports. The FAO regional groupings used in the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023 report cover 54 ESCAP members and associate members in the Asia-Pacific region, of which 34 are in the FAO-defined region of Asia, 19 in Oceania and 1 in Northern America and Europe. This classification follows the M49 statistical standard (https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49).

The composition of FAO regional groupings used in the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023 report is available at: https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/1f66b67b-1e45-45d1-b003-86162fd35dab/content.

D.   International Labour Organization (ILO)

The ILO regional groupings cover 58 ESCAP members and associate members in the Asia-Pacific region, of which 48 are in the ILO-defined Asia and the Pacific region, and 10 are in the Europe and Central Asia region. Among the countries and territories grouped in the Asia and the Pacific region defined by ILO, 39 are included in ILO modelled estimates. ILO's Asia and the Pacific region also includes four countries or territories that are not member or associate member to ESCAP.

The composition of ILO regional and subregional classifications is available at: https://ilostat.ilo.org/methods/concepts-and-definitions/classification-country-groupings/.

E.   Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)

IPU regional groupings cover 49 ESCAP members and associate members in the Asia-Pacific region, including 30 in the IPU-defined region of Asia, 14 in the IPU region of Pacific and 5 in the IPU region of Europe.

The composition of IPU regional and subregional classifications is available at: https://data.ipu.org/regional-groupings/?order=asc&sort=subregion.

F.   Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)

The UNAIDS regional groupings cover 39 ESCAP members and associate members in the Asia-Pacific region, of which 29 are located in the UNAIDS-defined Asia-Pacific region, 9 in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and 1 in Western and Central Europe and North America, as defined by UNAIDS.

The composition of UNAIDS regional groupings is available at: https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/2023-unaids-global-aids-update_en.pdf.

G.   United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

UNFPA's regional groupings cover 44 ESCAP members and associate members in the Asia-Pacific region, of which 35 are located in the UNFPA-defined region of Asia and the Pacific and 9 in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The UNFPA Asia-Pacific regional group also includes non-ESCAP member Tokelau.

The composition of UNFPA regional groupings is available at: https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/swp2024-english-240327-web.pdf.

H.   United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

UNICEF's regional groupings cover 51 ESCAP members and associate members in the Asia-Pacific region, including 32 in East Asia and the Pacific, 8 in South Asia, 10 in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and 1 in Middle East and North Africa as defined by UNICEF.

The composition of UNICEF geographic regions is available at: https://data.unicef.org/regionalclassifications/.

I.   United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

UNODC uses different regional groupings in different reports. The UNODC regional groupings used in the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022 cover 35 ESCAP members and associate members in the Asia-Pacific region, including 19 in the UNODC-defined region of East Asia and the Pacific, 8 in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 7 in South Asia and 1 in Western and Southern Europe.

The composition of UNODC regional groupings used in the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022 is available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2022/GLOTiP_2022_web.pdf.

J.   United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women)

UN-Women's regional groupings cover 58 ESCAP members and associate members in the Asia-Pacific region, including 36 in the UN-Women-defined region of Asia, 21 in Oceania, and 1 in Europe. However, UN-Women regularly uses the United Nations SDG groupings for statistical purposes and in its publications.

The composition of UN-Women regional groupings is available at: https://data.unwomen.org/countries.

K.   World Health Organization (WHO)

WHO's regional groupings cover 51 ESCAP members and associate members in the Asia-Pacific region, including 3 in the WHO-defined region of Eastern Mediterranean, 11 in Europe, 10 in South-East Asia and 27 in Western Pacific.

The composition of WHO regional groupings is available at: https://www.who.int/countries.

L.   World Bank

The World Bank regional groupings cover 56 ESCAP members and associate members in the Asia-Pacific region, including 37 in the World Bank-defined East Asia and the Pacific, 10 in Europe and Central Asia, 8 in South Asia and 1 in Middle East and North Africa.

The composition of World Bank regional groupings is available at: **https://data.worldbank.org/country**.

BEIJING
+30

Gender equality is key to sustainable development and a prerequisite to achieving peaceful and just societies and a healthy planet. But what progress has been made toward upholding this human right and empowering women and girls in Asia and the Pacific? What challenges remain and how should these be addressed in the light of climate change, demographic shifts and digital transformation?

Charting New Paths for Gender Equality and Empowerment: Asia-Pacific Regional Report on Beijing+30 Review provides an in-depth analysis of the progress and gaps in implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a global framework for advancing the agenda for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. The report identifies opportunities and forward-looking strategies to accelerate progress in a rapidly changing region.