Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

OUTLOOK

Achieving this goal will be challenging. Gender-based inequalities continue to be a pivotal obstacle for the region, with women facing multiple forms of discrimination, socioeconomic and cultural barriers and serious threats to their security, which violate their basic rights and constrain their capacities. Gender gaps in economic and political participation persist, while pervasive trends in violence against women and girls remain an issue of grave concern. Without urgent action in advancing gender equality, the realization of the entire 2030 Agenda hangs in the balance.

THE PHOTO

A scholarship student at Ewha Woman’s University in the Republic of Korea, the world’s largest educational institute for women

Photo credit: ESCAP
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INSIGHTS

• Aside from being a stand-alone goal, gender equality is a cross-cutting priority for the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

• Lessons learned from the Millennium Development Goals experience reiterate the proven synergy between gender equality and development outcomes. Available data highlight a general correlation between a country’s ranking on the Human Development Index and the Gender Inequality Index.¹

• Women have an integral role in helping countries achieve all the SDGs, with many targets specifically acknowledging women’s empowerment as both the aim and part of the solution.

• Despite notable progress in some areas, such as girls’ access to education (covered under SDG 4), stark gender-based disparities remain in relation to rights and opportunities.

• Comprehensive policy and legislative action is essential to protect women’s rights across the region. Even though all but three countries have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and an increasing number are adopting legal and policy measures on gender equality, challenges remain in terms of enforcement, implementation and monitoring.

• Monitoring progress and evidence-based policymaking are hampered by the non-availability of sufficient sex-disaggregated data for a number of countries in the region. Lack of comparable data (concepts, definitions and data collection methods vary across countries) hampers monitoring.

BRIGHT SPOTS

Political participation

• A few countries stand out for substantial improvements in their share of female parliamentary representation: It jumped in Nepal from 5.9 per cent in 2000 to 29.5 per cent in 2015, in Kyrgyzstan from 1.4 per cent to 23.3 per cent and in Singapore from 4.3 per cent to 25.3 per cent over the same time period.

• As of 2015, Timor-Leste had the highest rate of representation of women in national parliament, at 38.5 per cent, helped along no doubt by an electoral law requirement that one in every three candidates on political lists is a woman. New Zealand had the second-highest such representation in 2015, at 31.4 per cent of seats held by women.²
Sexual and reproductive health

- As of 2015, the demand for family planning satisfied with modern methods in the Asia-Pacific region stood at 86.3 per cent for married or in-union women of reproductive age, slightly above the 82.2 per cent world average. Despite progress at the regional level, this figure masks disparities in several countries, and challenges remain in reaching under served populations, particularly women residing in rural and remote areas, as well as adolescents and youth.\(^3\)

HOTSPOTS

Violence against women and girls and harmful practices

- The incidence of child marriage as well as early and forced marriage persists. In Bangladesh, 52 per cent of women aged 20–24 years in 2013 had married before they were 18 years old, with approximately 18 per cent married before they were 15 years old. In countries as diverse as Bhutan, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Thailand and Vanuatu, between a quarter and a fifth of women had married before they were 18.\(^4\)

- In countries for which data are available, a large proportion of women experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence in the 12 months prior to data collection. According to available Demographic and Health Surveys and World Health Organization Studies, 44 per cent of women in Vanuatu in 2009, 36 per cent of women in Kiribati in 2008 and 31 per cent of women in Timor-Leste in 2010 reported such violence.\(^5\)

Women’s economic participation, access to economic resources and unpaid care work

- Gender parity in employment does not exist in most countries, regardless of the economic development level.\(^6\) Female-to-male labour force participation ratios have declined in the region, from 0.67 in 1990 to 0.61 in 2015.\(^7\)

- Women earn less than men in almost all Asian and Pacific countries with available data (the Philippines and Turkey are the exceptions). In more than half of these countries, the gender wage gap reported in 2015 was more than 20 per cent.\(^8\)

- The large share of unpaid care and domestic work shouldered by women exposes them to time poverty and contributes to the persistent gender-based gap in labour force participation, activity rates and wages. Available data in some countries in the region indicate that women engage in ten times as much unpaid work as men.\(^9\) However, accurate comparisons are difficult to make due to non-standardized survey methodologies.

- Less than 10 per cent of agricultural land holders are women in Bangladesh (at 4.6 per cent in 2008), Fiji (at 3.6 per cent in 2009), the Islamic Republic of Iran (at 5.9 per cent in 2002) and Nepal (at 8.1 per cent in 2002).\(^10\)
Discriminatory inheritance legislation remains an obstacle for women, with widows and daughters having no inheritance rights at all in some countries in the region.11

Equal opportunity for leadership

- Although overall trends show some progress, women’s political representation levels in Asia and the Pacific continue to be low compared with other regions. In the majority of countries, women hold less than 30 per cent of seats in their national parliament.12 Overall in 2015, 18.1 per cent of national parliament seats in the region were held by women, up from only 13.1 per cent in 2000.13

- Data compiled in 2015 for 20 developing Asian economies showed that while women accounted for 40 per cent of the workforce, only 14.4 per cent of corporate boardroom members and senior managers were women. Kazakhstan and Viet Nam had a respectable female representation in private sector top management, each exceeding 30 per cent. The female share of top management in South-East Asia was above the Asian average of 14.4 per cent, led by the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore.14

EMERGING ISSUES

- Changing demographic trends are likely to have differentiated impacts on men and women. With ageing populations in countries across the region, older women, owing to their longer life expectancy than men as well as their heightened vulnerability to neglect, violence and abuse, will need specific policy attention as a group that is often left “furthest behind”. An ageing population also puts an added care burden on the shoulder of women. Another demographic concern is the specific needs of women and girl refugees and migrants who face additional challenges of psychosocial stress and trauma, health complications, physical harm, injury and multiple forms of discrimination, violence and exploitation, particularly when they are in transit.

- As the world’s most disaster-prone region, Asia and the Pacific experience an immense toll caused by natural disasters, with women and girls more likely to be disproportionately affected due to sociocultural norms and the inequitable distribution of roles, resources and power. Continued efforts are needed towards ensuring gender-sensitive disaster risk reduction strategies that take into account both women’s vulnerabilities in specific contexts while also highlighting their potential capabilities to prepare, confront and recover from disasters.

TARGETS

5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere

5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation

5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation
5.4 Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.

5.5 Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

5.6 Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences.

5.a Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.

5.b Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.

5.c Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.