ECONOMIST IMPACT

The state of gender inclusion in Asia-Pacific's regulatory landscape

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Foreword

For Asia-Pacific (APAC), gender inclusion and women-led development are crucial to achieving inclusive sustainable development. The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) recently concluded that based on current trends, it will take another 42 years for Asia-Pacific to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. SDG 5 continues to see stagnated progress due to a range of cultural, social, and political factors.

It is estimated that on the current trajectory, East Asia will need another 189 years to achieve gender equality, while South Asia will need 149 years to close this gap. APAC alone has witnessed female labour force participation in the region drop by nearly 10% between 1990 and 2021.

The covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated gender inequality across APAC and since the pandemic in 2023, the SDG funding gap has increased by 70%, requiring an estimated US$4.2trn annually for the region. Women and girls also experienced a disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work owing to the lockdowns. Furthermore, 1.2m additional girls in East Asia and the Pacific region are now at risk of not returning to school due to the pandemic, on top of the 15m who were already not enrolled pre-crisis.

While this journey of inclusive growth and progress in the region has proved to be challenging, APAC countries have also introduced progressive and in some cases world-leading policies. From South Asian governments exploring private telecom partnerships to address digital inclusion and learning of women and girls, to Malaysia's effort to institutionalise better gender-disaggregated data, or development finance instruments such as those in Vietnam and Bangladesh, APAC countries are leading some of the best thought-out policies that have been applied in challenging and diverse socio-cultural contexts.

However, the region continues to face barriers in achieving gender inclusion, and extensive progress is still needed in addressing discriminatory beliefs, attitudes, and practices that perpetuate gender-based discrimination. Furthermore, despite progressive policies being drafted, there is still a long way to go in bridging implementation, financing, and accountability gaps at all levels of governance to continue to accelerate progress towards achieving SDG 5.

Within this context, for policies to expedite progress of women and girls, it is essential for gender equality proponents to work together; from policymakers and business leaders to NGOs and philanthropists to close the implementation gap.

The study titled "The state of gender inclusion in Asia-Pacific's regulatory landscape" is a collaborative philanthropic effort led by Asia Gender Network (AGN), launched in 2020. AGN is a network of impact leaders in APAC committed to achieving gender equality and originated out of the desire to engage business and impact leaders across Asia to change the trajectory for women and girls. Together, the members learn from each other's experience on the ground, collaborating on finding solutions, and inspiring others to join AVPN and its social investor community to drive gender equality in Asia.

This project has been spearheaded by the RPG Foundation, YTL Foundation and Mangosteen, and offers an overview of where the APAC region lies in terms of policies for and barriers to gender inclusion. The study provides a summary of the state of gender inclusion in existing policies in the region and also identifies what is working and not working across four critical areas: education, healthcare, economic empowerment, and political participation of women and girls.

The APAC region has made great progress in reducing poverty and enhancing living standards in recent decades. However, these benefits have been unequal and continue to perpetuate differences in progress within genders. To ensure the benefits of development are shared by all it is critically important to ensure that the gender equality gap is closed. This report highlights some of the key issues and recommendations that policymakers, social investors and civil society organisations should address by providing their voices and resources. It is hoped that it will prove to be a valuable resource as we continue the journey to achieve equality for women and girls across the region.

Co-signed by AGN Members:

- **Kathleen Chew,** Programme Director, YTL Foundation

- **Radha Goenka,** Director, RPG Foundation

About this report

This report, developed by Economist Impact and sponsored by AVPN, aims to illustrate the gender policy landscape for gender inclusion in Asia-Pacific (APAC). It spans four sectors: access to education and healthcare, and workforce and political participation. Throughout our assessment of the region, the guiding questions have been "Where is the region in terms of developing and implementing inclusive policies, laws and regulations to reduce gaps in gender participation and influence in the selected sectors?" and "What is the way forward for driving meaningful change at the regulatory level?"

Policies can support greater participation in the labour force and politics and offer protection from violence and harassment. Policies for education access can provide tools for encouraging autonomy and success. While, policies pertaining to access to healthcare enables retention in schools, colleges and work.

We hope to encourage a greater focus on gender-inclusive policies, laws and regulations by detailing current drivers of change, where there are still challenges, the institutions that are involved and the opportunities for change, in each sector and across sectors.

Fig 1: Assessment matrix for the gender inclusion landscape

Drivers

What are the current factors driving gender-sensitivity and - inclusion in this sector?

How are these sparking changes in SDG 5 at a regional and/or national level?

Institutions

Are there dedicated and cross-functional government institutions responsible for leading gender empowerment?

How are they developing mechanisms for bridging the gender gap in each sector?

Challenges

What obstacles are APAC countries facing in selected industries for narrowing the gender divide?

How are these factors impeding SDG 5 progress?

Opportunities

What policies, tools and networks can be leveraged to improve gender- specific outcomes and realise SDG 5 goals by 2030 for a particular sector?

Source: Economist Impact

In line with this, the research scope and limitations are given below:

i) **Gender spectrum:** The research covers women and girls in line with the UN SDGs as well as LGBTQIA+ issues where data is available.

ii) **Regional assessment:** The research explores the overall state of gender gaps in the Asia-Pacific (APAC) region and provides country examples where relevant.

iii) **Systemic/Structural issues:** The research covers systemic issues to the extent that they impact the policy landscape.

iv) **Implementation landscape:** The research assesses gender gaps through a policy development lens, rather than from an enforcement lens. At the same time, it captures enforcement-related issues wherever they intersect with policies and planning.

v) **Intersectionality:** The research covers gender gaps at the nexus of income groups, caste/ethnicity, disability and geography where data was available. The effects of climate change are not included in this assessment due to poor data availability and considerable overlap with the effects of migration.

Executive summary

The key findings of this report are:

Policy recognition of the gender spectrum is an emerging strength in the region: As a starting point, countries in the region have begun reforming legislations that include all genders and grant them equal rights in the four sectors, from the Philippines' Magna Carta of Women (MCW), a comprehensive women's human rights law to recognise, protect, fulfil and promote women from all socioeconomic backgrounds, to the Nepal Constitution and the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) judgement in India recognise human rights for transgender people in relation to education, employment and/or health.

Dedicated financing for gender mainstreaming is enabling equality: APAC countries are stepping up financing efforts through extensively applied gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) approaches at the national and international levels. For example, the Philippines' inclusion of gender in development planning and budgeting is emerging from the best practices around GRB in the region.

The coverage of existing policies is limited to certain demographics, leaving out people at intersections: Despite an array of policies for greater gender inclusion, policies tend to not always capture those experiencing marginalisation due to the intersection of various sources of inequality. For example, a large number of women cannot benefit from contributory social insurance schemes as they lack informal sector coverage, with nearly 64% of women in the APAC region being employed in the informal sector.

There is a need for policies countering online and offline gender-based violence in the region: Current policies tackling gender-based violence tend to provide limited coverage of sexual abuse and exploitation. Particularly online, even where bullying and anti-harassment policies are available, measures to either criminalise or penalise such behaviour on digital platforms as well as in public spaces, particularly political spaces, are lacking within these.
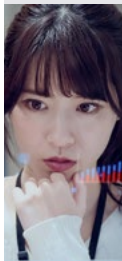
Missing data on gender across sectors limits decision-making and results in missing policies and inadequate coverage: Data on gender is not consistently collected, tracked and analysed for policy development in the region. This also aggravates the issue of exclusion of people at intersections. Malaysia's Statistical Training Institute offers the way forward as it coordinates and collects national gender data and offers training in gender statistics.

Socio-cultural norms and traditional views of gender roles limit implementation: Harmful perceptions prioritising family unity in case of gender-based violence "which should be preferably resolved within the family" embedded in laws, traditional views of marriage without legal rights to contest it, and education and employment opportunities differing based on gender contribute to the gender inclusion gap across the region.

Digitalisation, education and partnerships offer pathways to parity: The ecosystem for bridging gender gaps within and across sectors involves creating new opportunities to level the playing field for all genders from the earliest stages of education to introduce generational change in this space. Digitalisation offers another opportunity to overcome the barriers in access and availability across sectors, with public-private partnerships at its core.

Introduction

According to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Report 2023, SDG 5 gender equality is one of the goals most in peril, with limited progress in 2022. Few of the SDG's sub-indicators have reported data and many are far off track from the 2030 target.[1]

At the current rate, it will take an estimated 300 years to end child marriage, 286 years to close gaps in legal protection and remove discriminatory laws, 140 years for women to be represented equally in positions of power and leadership in the workplace, and 47 years to achieve equal representation in national parliaments.[2]

Fig 2: Current rate of progress for gender inclusion

equal representation in national parliaments

close gaps in legal protection and remove discriminatory laws

2070

2163

2309

2323

Equal representation of women in positions of power and leadership in the workplace

end child marriage
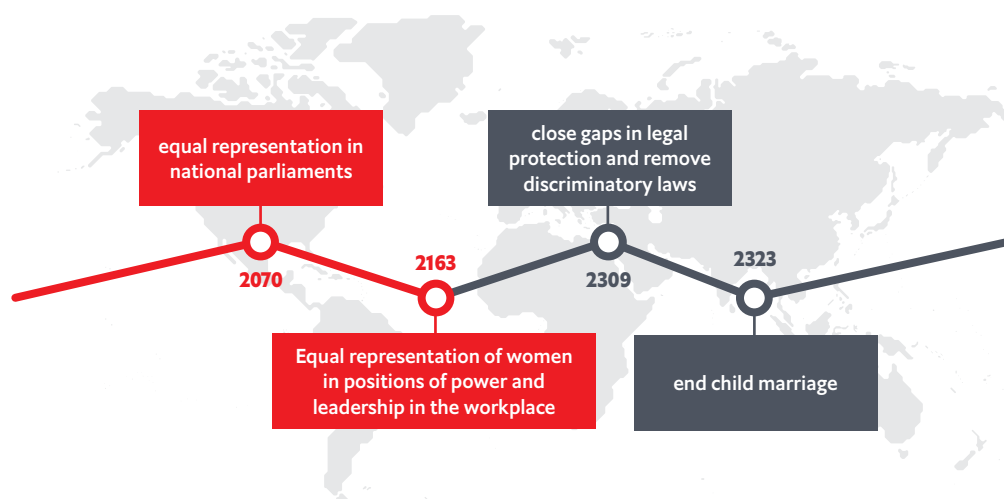
Source: The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023

This slow progress has implications beyond the worthy aim of gender equality itself. Gender equality has an intersectionality with other SDGs and therefore, its achievement – or not – impacts on their attainment. For example, evidence from a number of regions and countries shows that closing the gender gap reduces overall poverty.[3][4]

In APAC, there is a mixed picture as social and economic contexts differ across the region. The gender gap in South Asia is much higher than the global average, whereas East Asia and the Pacific have a narrower gap.

Fig 3: Regional comparison of gender inequality
UN Gender Inequality Index (2021)

Source: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

Region	Index
Arab states	0.536
East Asian and the Pacific	0.337
Europe and Central Asia	0.227
Latin America and the Caribbean	0.381
South Asia	0.508
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.569
World	0.465
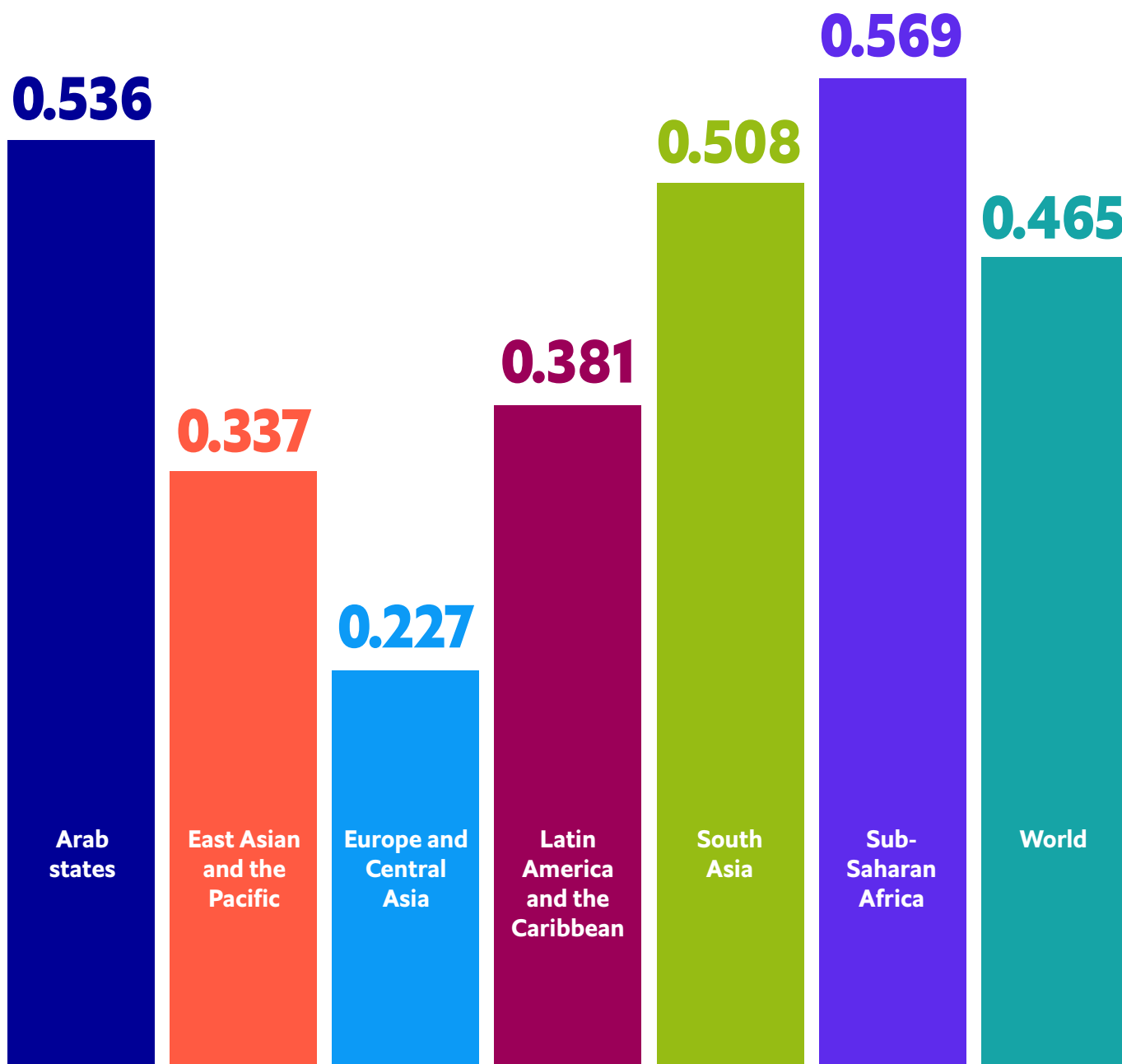
For Natasha Garcha, senior director, innovative finance and gender-lens investing specialist at Impact Investment Exchange (IIX), this linkage of gender equality and other development goals points to solutions, rather than challenges. She explains that the unique insights from women and other genders position them as important parts of the growth story. "For example, women are very much positioned as being disproportionately burdened with the impact of climate change, which is true because they don't own resources and are very reliant on natural resources, especially in emerging markets. But that means they actually have insights and solutions that the rest of us don't have, so they are very much positioned to be important parts of the green transition."

Equal treatment under the law

The UN's charter for gender equality covers both equitable representation and influence for "people-centred development". Gender-equal responsibilities and opportunities are, however, dependent on rights and equal treatment of women under the law.[5]

While 2.4bn working-age women live without the same rights as men globally, in 2022, countries adopted the fewest gender reforms in over two decades, with legal rights and progress reversed in some countries.[6]

Zonibel Woods, senior social development specialist at Asian Development Bank (ADB), says: "Progress has been quite uneven, from the extreme of Afghanistan, where basically women are being erased from society, the economy and public life, to other end of countries that have made some progress".

She adds, "We still have a lot of work to do in addressing the existing discriminatory beliefs, attitudes and practices that perpetuate gender-based violence and a lack of accountability, particularly when it comes to policies and justice for victims of violence that are allowing perpetrators to commit acts of gender-based violence with impunity."

Recognising the importance of laws and policies in providing the basis for equal rights and opportunities, this report concentrates on the regulatory landscape of gender inclusion in the APAC region. We begin with cross-sectoral drivers and challenges and institutions, before deep-diving into sector-specific chapters that focus on access to education and healthcare, and workplace and political participation. Finally, we conclude with opportunities and strategies for the future.
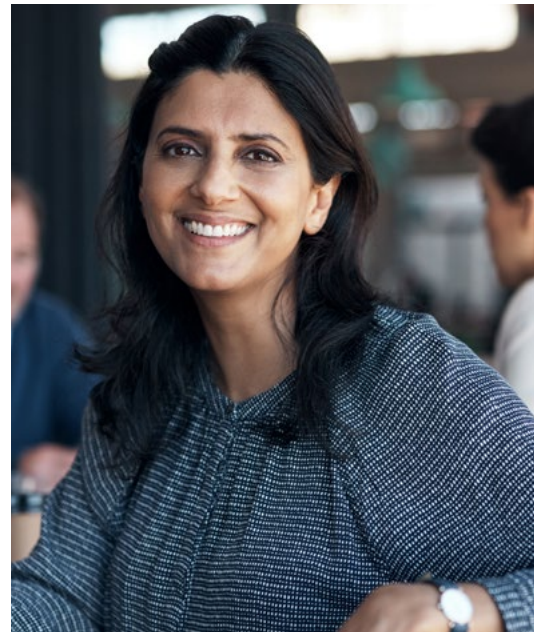
Chapter one: Asia-Pacific's gender inclusion landscape

In recent years, there has been increased support for gender-sensitive legislation and policies. This includes reforms for womens and girls rights, such as India's Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act in 2005 and the Philippines 'Anti Child Marriage Act'[7].

Similarly, there have been reforms for those identifying with non-binary gender identities. For example, in 2014, the Supreme Court of India affirmed that the fundamental rights granted by the Constitution applied to transgender people, gave them the right to self-identification of their gender as male, female or third gender, and stated that gender identity did not refer to biological characteristics but rather "an innate perception of one's gender".[8] Similarly, in Taiwan in 2021, the Taipei High Administrative Court ruled that the enforcement of surgery to change one's gender registered at birth violates the constitution.[9]

Some governments are also backing policies with financing that specifically accounts for gender. A trailblazer in the region for its gender-responsive budgeting (GRB),[10] India is one of the few countries globally to incorporate this at the local levels of governance. Among the G20 member states[11], Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea participate in gender-responsive foreign aid and cooperation.[12]

In addition to GRB, investments in critical public infrastructure are reducing gender gaps in the region. For example, improving access to the internet can enable women and vulnerable gender groups to take online courses to learn vital skills, telecommute to jobs that provide better pay and more opportunity, and carry out a range of personal, financial and business transactions online, particularly when in combination with digital identification cards and online or mobile bank accounts.[13]

According to Kanta Singh, deputy country representative, UN Women India, "Starting from financing for education and better health to financing skilling for mobility and safety,

everything has to do with finance because policies are not good enough if they are not supported by finance allocations. Both the public and private sectors have to come together with financial institutions to fill that gap." Since the covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the SDG funding gap has increased by 70%, requiring an estimated US$4.2trn annually.[14]

International cooperation has also been key to supporting policy change. For example, ASEAN's Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework 2021–2025 has both an internal focus – looking at the Association's own policies, practices and organisational culture and structure – as well as external factors, including a strategic regional approach to supporting Member States' national gender mainstreaming efforts.[15]

India's gender-responsive budgeting journey

A long-standing policy tool in the country, India first introduced a Gender Budget Statement in the 2005-06 Budget to further women and girls' development objectives, such as education, health and access to public infrastructure.[16] The Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) since adopted the "Budgeting for Gender Equity" as a mission statement while the Ministry of Finance set up Gender Budget Cells to serve as gender mainstreaming focal points for GRB.[17]

The MWCD played a crucial role in the expansion of gender budgeting from the national level to the subnational level by conducting gender budgeting exercises in 15 major states in India and coordinating annual state focused studies. The MWCD also published a Gender Budgeting Handbook and Gender Budgeting Manual and provided capacity building training for officials preparing the gender budgeting statements across sectors.[18]

The publicly available budget-related information is a key strength of India's GRB approach.[19] Owing to its strong political will, institutionalised GRB at both the national and subnational levels and precedent for developing gender responsive architecture across agencies, India's GRB approach offers learnings for other countries.

Cross-sectoral challenges

Despite this sporadic progress, the region still faces challenges that affect gender equality across sectors. It is constrained by socio-cultural norms impacting policy articulation or formulation, support/provisions, coverage/reach/scale, monitoring, enforcement and the enabling environment for gender equality.

For Zharin Zhafrael, former executive director at Musawah (an organisation that brings together NGOs, activists, scholars, legal practitioners and policy-makers to achieve equality and justice in the Muslim family), policy must be supported by changes in society. "Our fundamental belief is that you can't have equality in society without equality in the family, as the basic unit of any societal organisation," she says.

Socio-cultural norms, combined with a lack of political will, impact whether policy changes are enacted, supported and ultimately succeed in achieving gender inclusion. In Japan in 2015, the government set targets for training and hiring women into senior roles in exchange for financial incentives. But when companies did not use those incentives, the government reduced the targets, rather than increasing the incentives for companies.[20]

Senutha Poopale Ratthinan, deputy undersecretary, policy and strategic planning division, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development Malaysia explains that most countries lack a deeper understanding of what it means to put on a gender lens to policymaking. In Malaysia, policymakers' recognition of gender gaps catalysed the formation of newer initiatives, teams and functionaries to implement capacity-building training programmes for all the respective ministries, and cooperation with other countries, like the US, to learn from experts about incorporating a gender lens across policies and programmes.

Policy effectiveness is also impacted by its often limited scope. For example, in China, labour laws for wage parity and sexual harassment do not recognise and cover the informal sector (estimated at 12.7% of the overall economy, or approximately $3.252trn at GDP PPP levels). This means women working in the informal sector have no legal right to challenge gender wage gaps or mechanisms to complain about sexual or other forms of harassment in the workplace.[21]

Ravi Verma, Regional Director at Asia Regional Office of the International Center for Research on Women, says that the most glaring gap is the lack of inclusion of gender and sexual diverse groups in policies and programmatic frameworks.

He explains that this impacts where, how and to what extent they are addressed in programmes and policies.

Even well-intentioned policy can fail if created without sufficient consultation with the people it will impact or the civil society organisations that represent them. "Sometimes policies are made irrespective of what is happening on the ground and that generates its own process of change that is very chaotic," says Mr Verma. "It does not really happen the way the policy intended and outcomes are not synchronised. This creates a huge gap that must be bridged by non-state actors."

These issues are compounded by a lack of gender-disaggregated data collection and monitoring, which could demonstrate the impact of current policies on gender equality. For instance, Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SHRH) coverage in Nepal has been hindered by a lack of data on unmarried youth for fertility, contraception and family planning.[22]

Gendered norms are also reinforced by the gendered language of existing policies, such as Myanmar's education policy, which embeds gender roles in the curricula for subjects like English. Gendered norms restrict both the ambitions of girls and women, and their ability to achieve their goals.[23]

According to Rebecca Baylosis, supervising gender and development specialist, the Philippine Commission on Women, addressing social norms in policy is a top challenge: "The difficulty with pursuing gender targets in various areas is hampered by existing norms, cultures and values that are embedded in the systems. So there's a need to change the systems". She adds that the Philippines has adopted a gender

mainstreaming strategy and GRB, among other policy tools, to address this.

Policy can be slow to adapt to changes in society, particularly to the changes in a more digitalised world. Policies that safeguard bullying on social media platforms, where much of the current public discourse takes place, have only come about following significant reporting of incidents. In 2021, Japan's 'Gender Parity Law' was amended to prevent sexual harassment against women candidates and representatives after significant reporting of abuse and harassment both online and offline.[24]

Cross-sectoral institutions

Fig 4: Gender inclusion stakeholder ecosystem

National and local governments

Women-led organisations

International and multilateral organisations

Private sector organisations

Financial institutions and investors

Civil society organisations

Source: Economist Impact

National governments have a central role to play in creating policies to even the playing field. For example, efforts to improve and expand education for girls and women must begin with a policy that gives the fundamental legal right to education, such as Vietnam's Article 10 of the Education Law of 2005, which ensures the equal right to access to learning opportunities "regardless of ethnic origins, religions, beliefs, gender, family background, social status or economic conditions".

Governments can also accelerate change by creating state-run women's councils and organisations to coordinate efforts to improve gender equality across government functions, such as the Cambodian National Council for Women. It is improving the representation and influence of women at various levels of governance and decision-making by coordinating and tracking gender-related laws, policies and initiatives. The council has also focussed on the development of female leaders and civil servants

at the national and sub-national levels, with 6,822 women out of the total 28,542 civil servants receiving capacity building on various knowledge and skills in 2022.[25]

Some governments are also creatively using their soft power to affect change. Rather than mandating quotas to increase the share of women in key decision-making positions,

Malaysia set a target of 30% for government-linked companies and published the names of publicly listed companies without women on their boards of directors. As a result, by May 2023, the percentage of women holding a board of directors' positions in the top 100 public-listed companies stood at 29.7%, based on Securities Commission figures.[26]

Malaysia strengthens gender data collection and response

Challenged with a lack of gender-disaggregated data, the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) has institutionalised gender data collection and analysis to enable targeted solutions and monitoring of existing programmes.[27] The country has three key priorities for developing national gender data over a span of five years—establishing interagency coordination mechanisms on gender statistics, creating gender-disaggregated dimensions in existing statistics and improving existing data management techniques to address gender data gaps.[28]

The DOSM is the focal point responsible for compiling and assessing SDG indicators from relevant agencies in Malaysia. The DOSM has undertaken studies on data readiness, gap analyses, and needs assessment and mapping exercises at the national and subnational levels. The country has also identified indicators from a gender perspective and its SDG5 dashboard provides publicly available data on its web portal.[29] The Malaysian Statistical Training Institute also offers courses on gender statistics.[30]

Malaysia's Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD) also publishes data on women in the labour force, education, economy, health and decision-making. In 2004, MWFCD collaborated with the United Nations Development Partnership (UNDP) to initiate Malaysia's Gender Gap Index (MGGI) as a tool for monitoring trends and disparities over time.[31] The MWFCD and DOSM also engaged to improve the collection of gender-disaggregated data by incorporating gender perspectives into development planning and resourcing decisions.[32]

However, governments alone cannot create effective change. International and multilateral organisations have been critical partners for governments to identify on-ground issues and amend policies for greater impact. For instance, Vietnam's Ministry of Health partnered with UNFPA, the UN sexual and reproductive health

agency, to launch 'Chiên Dich', an awareness-building campaign against violence towards women.[33] The campaign calls for action from members of the public and local authorities to report violence and provides knowledge and skills to women and children to help prevent violence, as well as support those affected.[34]

Civil society groups are also helping governments understand how existing policy is working and what further legislation is needed. Junie Foo, president and council member of the Council for Board Diversity (Singapore), says that working with NGOs on the ground has created a feedback loop for policy-making. This feedback supported an amendment to Singapore's Women's Charter that updated the definition of "family violence" to clarify that it includes physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse, as well as that it covers all survivors of family violence, regardless of gender.

The private sector is another key stakeholder, both working on its own and in partnership with the public and third sectors. The APAC region has many examples of effective partnerships. Mobile providers in South Asia, from Telenor Pakistan to Mobitel Sri Lanka, have teamed up with industry organisation GSMA to increase the percentage of women in their mobile internet base and provide digital skilling programmes.

Banks, micro-financing institutions (MFIs) and impact investors provide private capital for programmes supporting women and girls, and directly to women. Vietnam's Tao Yeu May (TYM) fund and Bangladesh's Grameen Shakti (GS) Micro-loans Initiative are reducing the gender funding gap for female entrepreneurs, whereas impact investors are developing financial instruments like Orange Bonds, a cross-cutting asset class designed to empower women and equip them to solve challenges ranging from peacebuilding to climate action.[35] [36]

What will be most effective is an ecosystem for bridging gender gaps within and across sectors, which can coordinate dedicated governing bodies for gender and related issues, government agencies collecting gender-disaggregated data, public-private partnerships, civil society groups, and the private sector, as employers and as funders of initiatives, including impact investors and development banks.

Soumya Guha, director of gender transformative policy and practice, Plan International, also adds "It's important that we create fora, where youth, women and girls, and the LGBTQIA+ community can actually interact with policymakers and talk about their own issues. These platforms are sometimes available in policy circles within the national government, but are also needed within bilateral or multilateral agencies, to ensure a better chance of actually developing pro-inclusive legislation".

Chapter two:
Access to education

Access to education is vital both for the future prospects of girls but also for their families, communities and economies. It is key to breaking cycles of poverty and addressing structural inequalities. If every girl received 12 years of quality education, women's overall lifetime earnings could increase by $15trn to $30trn globally–a huge boon for them and for economies.[37]

The families and communities of better-educated women also see the benefits. Educating girls averted more than 30 million deaths of children under five years old and 100 million deaths in adults 15 to 60 years old.[38] A child whose mother can read is 50% more likely to live past the age of five, 50% more likely to be immunised and twice as likely to go to school. For every additional year of schooling a girl receives, her country's resilience to climate disasters can be expected to improve by 3.2 points on a scale of 0-100, where 100 is resilience to climate change.[39][40]

Fig 5: The socio-economic impact of educating girls

30m+ deaths of children under five & 100m deaths in adults aged 15-60 were averted by educating girls

Educating mothers improve a child's chance to live, receive immunisation and school education past the age of five by 50%

For every additional year of schooling a girl receives, her country's resilience to climate disasters can be expected to improve by 3.2%
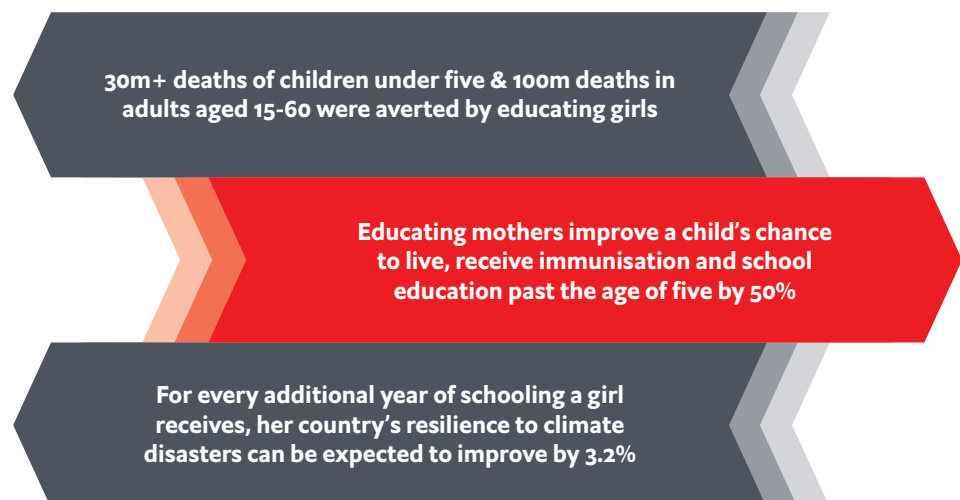
Source: Global Partnership for Education and UNGEI

The APAC region has made significant progress in increasing access to education and its quality. Most countries also have policies that report on the gender gap across different indicators. However, more than 42% (43 million) of the world's illiterate youth, 56% of whom are female, and almost 60% (446 million) of the world's illiterate adults, two-thirds of whom are female, live in the APAC region.[41]

Covid-19 exacerbated the problem. UNESCO estimates that 1.2 additional girls in the East Asia and Pacific region are at risk of not returning to school due to the pandemic, on top of the 15 million who were already not enrolled pre-crisis.[42]

Drivers of policy

Improved access to education has been driven by gender-sensitive laws to guarantee the right to education. Additionally, policy is enabling women's participation in areas traditionally deemed more masculine, such as technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

In Fiji, gender norms are being challenged by its government-run Technical College of Fiji, which has developed TVET courses that have led to increased women's participation in traditionally male-dominated fields like industrial arts and male participation in traditionally women-dominated fields like cooking.[43]

Education is also being used as a means to make women and girls more aware of their rights, and more broadly to challenge traditional gender norms. Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam have introduced education policies and awareness-raising programmes on gender-based violence to strengthen women's legal literacy.[44]

Challenges

Gender equality in education is still constrained, particularly in traditionally male-dominated fields. There is a lack of gender-inclusive policies enabling STEM education for all. Ms Woods at ADB says: "As economies are transitioning to green economies, the jobs that are being generated are largely those that require technical skills in STEM. Girls' participation in STEM needs to be supported to a larger extent—it's not equal to that of boys."

Across the region, there are harmful perceptions of certain fields like engineering as "masculine" or others like healthcare as "feminine", and little evidence of policies addressing the need for a shift in attitudes.[45]

Ms Bhattacharya shares that "the education and the conditioning provided – or lack thereof – impacts the way somebody makes decisions" about what type of education, training or career they are capable of pursuing.[46]

There are also discriminatory social norms that restrict girls' access to education. Afghanistan's Taliban government illustrates a critical example of the reversal of progress in a country's access to education for girls and women, among other areas, due to prevailing socio-cultural norms. They are also a major factor in the early pregnancy and marriage of girls in Cambodia, which impacts their ability to continue secondary and tertiary education.

<div style="background:red">**Opportunities** 🔓</div>

Greater policy focus on three areas–better data, increased representation and breaking down gendered norms–may reduce the gender gap in access to education.

- **Better data:** Governments can look to the example of Nepal, where a partnership between the government, UNICEF and other development organisations developed an 'Education Equity Index', which draws on household surveys to capture inequalities in education across dimensions, including gender, caste, ethnicity, disability, geography and wealth. This has provided education policymakers with information that allows them to better target their policies and programmes.[47]

- **Increased representation:** Quotas may be instituted to ensure that women are adequately represented at all levels of education and research. For example, Tajikistan has introduced quotas in education for women from rural areas, while South Korea has introduced quotas at research institutions.[48]

- **Breaking down gendered norms:** Education systems must be reviewed for curricula and structures that reinforce gendered norms, particularly in spaces such as TVET and STEM that have traditionally been seen as "male". This must start from the beginning of education. Ms Woods at ADB explains, "By the age of 12, girls have formed their beliefs about themselves, their value, and what they can do. So you have to work with girls very early on so that they are confident, empowered young women who know their rights."

Chapter three:
Workforce participation

Despite efforts to close gender gaps in education, most women have not seen improved workforce participation opportunities.[49]

Overall, female labour force participation in APAC decreased by nearly 10% between 1990 and 2021.[50] Further, those working are over-represented in low-skilled, low productivity sectors, as well as in informal work, which is low-paid, unstable and with no social protection. Approximately 64% of women workers in APAC are employed in the informal sector.[51]

"Why do we need more women in proper workforces and formal workforces? So that they have insurance, health coverage, and pension; they get a salary and are not actually subsidising for the household work that they're doing; they learn from each other and have a network—an outlet to discuss issues they might not be able to inside their own homes," highlights Ms Singh.

Women's unpaid care work – four times more than men's – is a key reason for their lower participation in the labour market and over-representation in the informal sector.[52] The absence of sufficient care services, along with rapidly ageing societies and growing populations, mean these impediments to women's ability to access quality work are likely to grow.[53]

Ms Woods at ADB says: "We see talent is lost because the institutions, whether private or public, do not have the family-friendly policies and gender policies that women need for them to be able to raise a family and to be in a workplace that respects their contributions and that is free from harassment." This is demonstrated by the exodus of women from jobs in STEM. In South Korea, for example, the lack of family-friendly working conditions leads to 53% of women discontinuing their STEM education and career.[54]

Progress towards equality has also been hindered by the slow ratification of and compliance with international labour standards by some countries in the region, with weak monitoring and enforcement even in countries that have ratified these standards. Women in the region are largely excluded from economic decision-making, and under-represented in social dialogue and collective bargaining.[55] Not only is this harming women, but it is also harming economies in the region. According to a 2018 study, achieving gender equality could add an extra US$370bn to regional GDP.[56]

Ms Zhafrael argues that a lack of women in the workforce is harmful to men as well. "Stereotypical roles are archaic and need to change. If only men are allowed to work and women have to be at home and provided for, that adds to the stress [that] men experience. As inflation and recession kick in, providing for the family is expensive, and you need double incomes to survive. So, it also has negative implications for men and their mental well-being."

Drivers

The covid-19 pandemic, which led to greater acceptance of remote and flexible working in sectors and occupations where it was possible to have these alternative arrangements, has helped people of all genders to better balance work and care responsibilities. Policies that would cement workers' rights to flexible working are now in the works. In Singapore, the government is consulting employers and workers on Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangements, which will be launched in 2024.[57]

Some countries have introduced policies to specifically help women with the burden of care by mandating maternity leave and providing benefits to working mothers, such as the 120 days of paid maternity leave Mongolian women now receive. However, few countries offer paternity leave or broader parental leave, which would help promote equal sharing of care responsibilities.[58] This is an important step in countering the "motherhood penalty", where companies are less likely to hire women as they worry they will take time off to have children. For example, South Korea offers parental leave to care for a child under six years old, with each parent able to use one year of leave, but not at the same time as the other parent.[59]

Policies that make the workplace safer for women have also been introduced to support gender-inclusive workforce participation. In Singapore, the Protection from Harassment Act (POHA) has been a major factor in increasing the labour force participation rate by 60%.[60] In India, efforts began in 1997 with the 'Vishaka Guidelines', which provided a framework for preventing and addressing sexual harassment at work, and continued in 2013 with the Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act (POSH Act), which covered all women including those in the domestic and unorganised sector.[61][62]

Challenges

There has been a lack of political will to enforce existing policies, or to recognise when policies have effects that are contrary to the goals of gender equality. For example, while microfinance programmes have shown enormous potential to increase women's labour force participation in Bangladesh, they have also concurrently increased the likelihood of intimate partner violence owing to the change in control of resources.[63]

Female entrepreneurs continue to be held back by a lack of willingness to invest in women-run businesses. While the Indian government started the Trade Related Entrepreneurship Assistance and Development (TREAD) scheme to provide preferential interest rates and credit guarantee schemes for women entrepreneurs, funding remains consistently lower than for male-led start-ups, and concentrated in more "female" sectors.[64]

More broadly, workers and entrepreneurs of all genders are still held back by a lack of infrastructure: widespread, reliable internet access; safe, regular public transport; and facilities that provide care for children, elderly and disabled.

Mr Guha also shares that as the region that is most impacted by climate change, women, children and marginalised groups from APAC are also the most impacted, and therefore, their needs must be prioritised. "Unfortunately, because of the bias against women and indigenous communities in this region, they are the ones who are going to be the most economically affected. But they are not just the victims of this—they are very important in terms of finding creative solutions."

Opportunities

Greater policy focus on three main areas–investment in infrastructure and family-friendly policies that enable greater workforce participation, as well as ensuring these supports are available to all workers, whether in the formal or informal sectors–may reduce the gender gap in workforce participation.

- **Infrastructure availability:** A range of infrastructure is needed, from affordable, quality childcare, as well as care for elderly and disabled people, to broader internet access, to public transportation that helps people get to work safely, which would enable the greater workforce participation of all genders but particularly women.According to the International Labour Organization, a lack of access to public transportation reduces women's workforce participation by 16.5%,[65] and this is particularly an issue in Asia, where women own fewer cars than men.

- **Family-friendly policies:** Laws that require employers to offer flexible working and other family-friendly policies, including mandated parental and carer leave, would also allow women to join the workforce in greater numbers.

- **Equal coverage:** In light of the large number of women working in the informal sector, more needs to be done to help these women have the same rights and opportunities as their counterparts in the formal sector. For example, contributory social insurance schemes should be extended to cover the informal sector.

Chapter four:
Political participation

Women's equal political participation is important symbolically, demonstrating that they have both the right and the ability to participate in shaping their countries and communities. Seeing women in positions of political power inspires other women and girls to see the importance of political participation in driving justice and systematic change, and to believe in their ability to impact their communities and societies.[66] Political participation is a means to gaining equality in other spaces, making laws that protect and support women and girls in all aspects of their life.

The benefits of gender parity in politics are numerous. It is a support to achieving the broader SDGs,[67] and parliaments with gender quotas are more stable[68]. Also, according to Ms Garcha: "States with higher gender equality are less prone to interstate conflict, and peace agreements last for at least 15 years longer and at a 35% higher rate if women are at the peace table."

However, while there has been incremental growth in women's political leadership, he pace is slow.[69] Women continue to be underrepresented at all levels of decision-making worldwide and achieving gender parity remains a distant goal.[70]

According to Ratthinan, political empowerment remains very low among most nations in the region. She explains there is reluctance to include women in leadership in governing bodies and political parties alike and the most important portfolios are often handed to men. To the general public, she also adds, "if you want women in politics, then you have to voice it to your MPs and parties".

Drivers

In APAC, gender-equal political participation is driven by legislated incentives for including women and monitoring gender-related data. When gender quotas were introduced in Afghanistan, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, the Kyrgyz Republic, Timor-Leste and Vanuatu, there were increases in parliamentary and/or local government representation.[71]

Policies that mandate the collection of better gender-disaggregated data can encourage increased political participation. The Malaysian Statistical Training Institute has been central to improving the coordination and collection of gender statistics in the country, and also offers training courses on gender statistics to support existing programmes pertaining to gender. Similarly, Vietnam's Ministry of Planning and Investment reports on 78 gender indicators, including women's representation in party committees and government leadership.[72]

Challenges

Challenges in other spaces, such as lack of internet access, are holding back women's increased political participation. In South Asia, the gender gap in internet access is 35% in favour of men, which impedes equal participation in public and political discourse and can lead to digital platforms being shaped by discriminatory views.[73]

This has been seen in the rise of online gender-based violence in political spaces. Women in politics are three times more likely to be targeted by online harassment and smear campaigns than their male counterparts.[74] They also experience sexual harassment, assault and discrimination from their political colleagues and the public.

The harassment faced by women in politics creates an increased workload as they must devote substantial time and energy to taking additional safety measures and combating disinformation. It also takes an emotional and mental toll on their personal lives, and likely limits their ability to freely express themselves and participate fully in public and political life.[75]

Laws that ensure safe and equal participation are needed – criminalising cyber harassment, including online hate speech against women and LGBTQIA+ people, as well as punishing the sexual discrimination, harassment and assault experienced physically in political spaces.

It was not until 2022, after repeated allegations of sexual assault and violent attacks on trans people and women, that the Australian parliament recommended that its MPs adopt behaviour standards and codes of conduct for no tolerance or ignorance of this type of abuse.[76]

Opportunities

Greater policy focus on three main areas–supporting women leaders, increased representation and enabling the aspirations of girls and women–may reduce the gender gap in political participation.

- **Support for women leaders:** As discussed, women in politics often face abuse and harassments, from the public as well as colleagues. Policy is needed to criminalise these attacks, as well as provide support to politicians of all genders who experience abuse, whether physical or online.

- **Increased representation:** Greater support will help to increase the number of women in politics, but quotas are also a tool to improve gender representation. Ms Woods at ADB says: "We absolutely need to increase the number of women in decision-making roles, not just in parliament, but also at the community level. We need to ask, where are the women? How do we support them? Can we support more women-led organisations?"

- **Aspirations:** Greater representation will encourage other women to get involved in politics and help young girls believe that they too can participate – the "role model" effect. A 2012 study in India found that increasing the proportion of women village leaders closed the "aspiration gap" between girls and boys by nearly 25 percentage points, as well as eventually erasing or reversing the gender gap in educational outcomes.[77] Ms Bhattacharya explains that women in leadership have a trickle-down effect:

"The outgoing president of Singapore was the first-ever female president of the country. That kind of signalling makes a difference in terms of who you see sitting in the decision-making seats and how that has impacted and changed policy."

- **Aspirations need to be supported with skills:** Considering the increasing role digital technology plays in the political space, initiatives that support the development of digital skills in women and girls could also help close the participation gap. It could also lead to women shaping the digital space to better suit their needs, actively governing these spaces to be safer for themselves, as well as providing greater career opportunities.[78] According to Ms Garcha, digital technologies need to be leveraged to ensure all genders are brought into this realm, with their voices being heard and feeding into the data that is collected from the digital domain.

Chapter five:
Access to healthcare

Health inequality can take many forms, with gender-based discrimination in healthcare systems, which is often the case with women and trans people. Traditional views of gender roles and gendered power relations, wherein families' consent is required to seek care, overshadow healthcare needs. Women also often put their healthcare needs last, prioritising the household instead.

Access to healthcare, particularly Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH), is central to driving inclusion as having agency and tools to make decisions about their own bodies are more likely to make women stay in education and in the workforce.[79]

The region is well behind in instituting laws that guarantee SRH rights, as well as meeting family planning needs with modern contraceptive methods.[80] The largest absolute number of women with an unmet need for modern contraception — about 70 million — live in South Asia.[81] Of those with unmet needs, the largest proportion represents married adolescent girls, due to traditional cultural views on the role of wife and mother. Across the region, 43% of all adolescent pregnancies are unintended — and most of them occur among married adolescent girls,[82] with one of the main consequences being the discontinuity of their education.

Unmet healthcare needs significantly contribute to maternal mortality and demonstrate how a lack of data is crippling progress. Countries in the region often do not collect information on girls aged below age 15, and without this, government, public health and private sector leaders cannot make informed decisions on how and where to direct funds for more equal healthcare.[83]

Drivers

Recognising that gender differences in health outcomes are driven by both biological differences and social determinants such as gender roles, access to resources, voice and agency,[84] improvements in gender-equal access has been driven by national health policies with intersectional coverage.

An example of a good practice in this sector has been India's 2017 National Health Policy included targeted interventions in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) for vulnerable groups including same-sex partners, transgender people, people with disabilities and sex workers, as well as for prioritised geographies.[85]

Other countries have instituted survivor-centred approaches in healthcare policies, ensuring access to comprehensive health care, including post-rape care, for survivors of

violence. Pakistan, with support from the World Health Organisation (WHO), introduced policy guidelines ('Medico-legal care for gender-based violence survivors') in 2011 and clinical guidelines ('Pakistani clinical handbook for health workers on the management of sexual and gender-based violence') in 2017.[86]

Challenges

Despite the introduction of some policies to support SRHR and survivors of violence, there is still a lack of comprehensive policy coverage for gender-based violence, which impacts the care survivors receive. Social norms also continue to shape laws and limit the impact of more progressive policies.

In Indonesia and Mongolia, policies state that violence against women and girls should be resolved at home without legal intervention for "family unity". In China and Lao PDR, the definition of domestic violence does not extend to emotional, psychosocial or economic abuse. In China, Malaysia and Japan, marital rape is not an offence. In the Philippines, rapists can be absolved of their crime if they marry their victims.[87]

Lack of policies for transgender healthcare also results in poor or insufficient care. According to a 2022 study, trans youth in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines face systemic discrimination and abuse due to the absence of policy coverage for trans health. This has had a huge impact on the HIV/AIDS response in the region, where there are disproportionately high rates among transgender people.[88]

Insufficient care can be driven by a lack of data on what type of care is needed. Ms Woods explains that current data is not always sex-disaggregated and needs to cover critical indicators such as what type of healthcare is being accessed by a particular gender and at which age. She adds that understanding the differing needs of all genders and tailoring services to these needs through data is a key area for improvement overall.

Opportunities

Greater policy focus on three main areas–increased access and support, especially for marginalised groups, education and representation–may reduce the gender gap in access to healthcare.

- **Increased access and support:** Greater resources need to be made available to support the existing healthcare system to deliver care, particularly SRH services, taking advantage of both public and civil society providers. NGOs that have strong relationships with marginalised groups are vital to improving their healthcare. These organisations may be better at identifying those in need and supporting them in accessing healthcare services. For example, in Indonesia during the pandemic, the government funded the NGO UNFPA Indonesia to provide conditional cash transfers to support people living with HIV, who struggle to access government and social protection schemes. The money helps people stay in treatment and with purchasing food, improving their nutrition. UNFPA Indonesia says it is now looking at how it might link this innovation into the Ministry of Social Affairs' social protection model.[89]

- **Education for health awareness:**
Age-appropriate school-level programmes can help girls to not only learn how to take better care of their own health, but also teach them what healthcare they are entitled to and how to access it. The impact of education has been seen in Malaysia, where its 2001 Adolescent Health Policy and the 2009 National Policy on Reproductive Health and Social Education (PEKERTI) paved the way for increased access to reproductive health education, information and services for adolescents and youth.[90]

- **Increased representation:** As in other sectors, greater representation of all genders in decision-making positions will help improve what healthcare is offered. Mr Verma of the International Center for Research on Women, says: "Look at the representation of women in health leadership – while 75% of the workforce in the health sector are women, only 10% to 15% of people in leadership positions are women."

Chapter six: Strategies for the future

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to bring about gender equality but across the four sectors under review in this study, there are common approaches with the potential to accelerate progress. Improved collection and usage of gender-disaggregated data, enforcement of existing laws, efforts to combat gendered norms and recognition of the intersectionality of gender with other development goals are vital, as is collaboration between a broad range of stakeholders.

Improving collection and use of gender-disaggregated data

Progress is impossible to measure and therefore difficult to improve if there is not sufficient data. Policies are needed that require the collection of sex- and gender-disaggregated data.

Ms Zhafrael says: "The issue is lack of gender aggregated data. Data is not democratised or always publicly available. However, data is crucial in order for civil society groups to be able to strategise and come up with much more relevant solutions to inclusion."

Data can support more effective use of gender mainstreaming–the integration of a gender perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, regulatory measures and spending programmes, in order to promote equality and combat discrimination.[91] It also can also support the use of GRB considering the situational and need-based differences of genders to evaluate government expenditure against national, regional and international level development commitments.[92]

Very importantly, data can help demonstrate the cost of not enacting gender-inclusive policy change. Ms Zhafrael says: "When it comes to government action, money talks. We are starting to put a price on carbon emissions, why don't we put a price on discrimination and prejudice and the impact of that?"

Indeed, policy can only be effective if it is enforced. Ms Zhafrael says: "The first step is always legislative reform–without it, you can't have enforcement. But we do see enforcement lacking."

Need for policies to address social norms and cultural contexts

Policies are also less effective if they only change laws/legal provisions and not mindsets. Stereotypes and social norms can hamper the implementation of new policies and keep women from making full use of their rights. Gender sensitivity training, such as that Thailand conducted across 130 agencies and 19 ministries in 2010, and public awareness campaigns, like those focussed on gender-based violence in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam, can help counter detrimental gender perceptions.

Ms Woods says: "The majority of men still consider that there are certain jobs that women should be doing, that men still make better leaders than women, that in most cases violence against women perpetrated by their intimate partner is justifiable, that women should take on the majority of the care work."

Policies that encourage the equal sharing of responsibilities can counteract traditional views of gender roles. While paid maternity leave is a vital step in the right direction, parental leave helps normalise the idea that men and women are equally responsible for childcare – and negates the "motherhood penalty". South Korea offers parental leave to care for a child under six years old, with each parent able to use one year of leave, but not at the same time as the other parent.[93]

Policy can also encourage change in gender stereotypes by providing women and girls with skills in areas traditionally seen as male. For example, India established the Women Scientists Scheme (WOS) to support women's re-entry into the science and technology workforce after a career break.[94]

Addressing intersectional challenges

Policymakers must recognise that gender inequality is a pervasive problem with a broad range of causes and diverse impacts, which intersect with other developmental issues.

Ms Bhattacharya says: "There's still more to do in terms of the intentionality with which funding goes out to gender, almost like a layer within each sector and within each program as opposed to 'I'm giving to health care' and 'I'm giving to gender'. Gender investing is still looked at as a sector."

Recognition of intersectionality can lead to better coordination. Mr Verma explains, "A lot of issues around gender inclusion in an intersectional framework remain unaddressed or under-addressed. We're still talking about women and men irrespective of the marginalisation happening because of other identities or other drivers such as caste, ethnicity or other attributes. The intersectional frame is not as prominent in the policy discourse as one would like, primarily because the development agenda has been siloed – education, health, governance, agriculture, every sector has its own outcomes to achieve. Therefore, we don't see gender inclusion from that multi-sectoral and inter-sectional kind of alliance."

Need for stakeholder collaboration

In order to improve coverage and reach everyone, collaboration between a broad range of stakeholders is required, to access necessary expertise and funding, and to build capacity. While private sector funding is likely the principal way to reach development goals, the public sector must find ways to incentivise it and work closely with civil society for effective and targeted growth.

Gender inequality is a multifaceted problem that will be informed by the context in each country–its traditional views on gender, the shape of its workforce and its education, healthcare and political systems, and the ways in which gender intersects with other social issues. Therefore the way in which improvements in gender equality will impact a country–its society, its economy–will vary as well. But the evidence overwhelmingly points to the positive benefits, not just for women and girls, but more broadly, from alleviating poverty to improving public health to fighting climate change.

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