

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

CHAPTER 3



ESCAP
Economic and Social Commission
for Asia and the Pacific



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

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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.

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.

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

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).

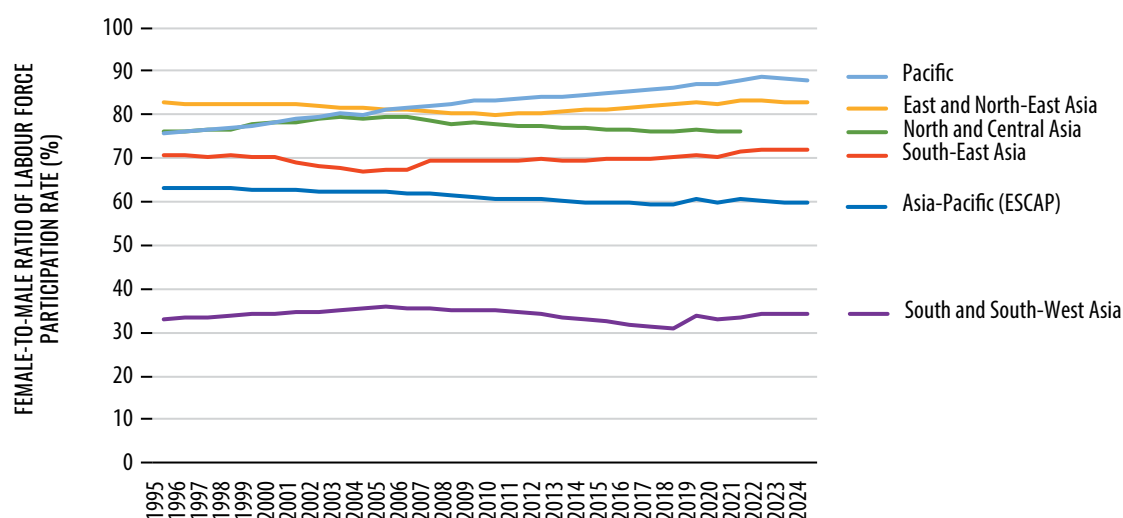
²⁰ When interpreting labour force participation statistics, two gender-related issues deserve attention. First, participation rates among certain groups of workers are likely to be underestimated. This is particularly the case for employed people who work for only a few hours in the reference period, 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).

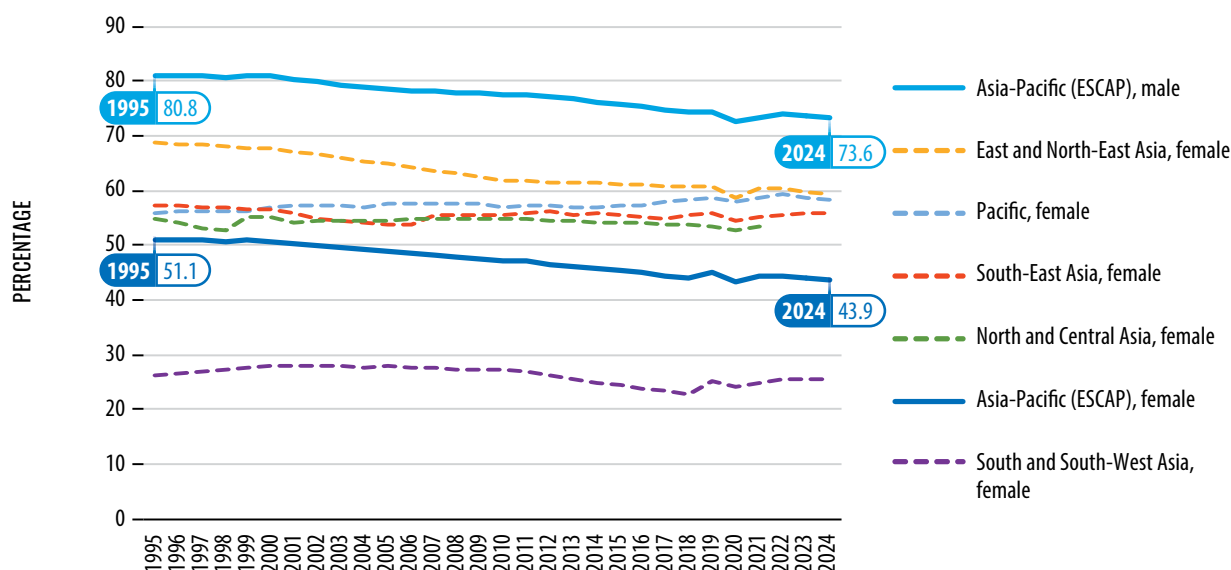
25 ILO STAT Database, "Labour force participation rate by sex and age", ILO modelled estimates (Nov. 2023), percentage, annual. Available at https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer49/?lang=en&id=EAP_2WAP_SEX_AGE_RT_A (accessed on 27 May 2024).

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/?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/?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_iryoku/iryohoken/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).

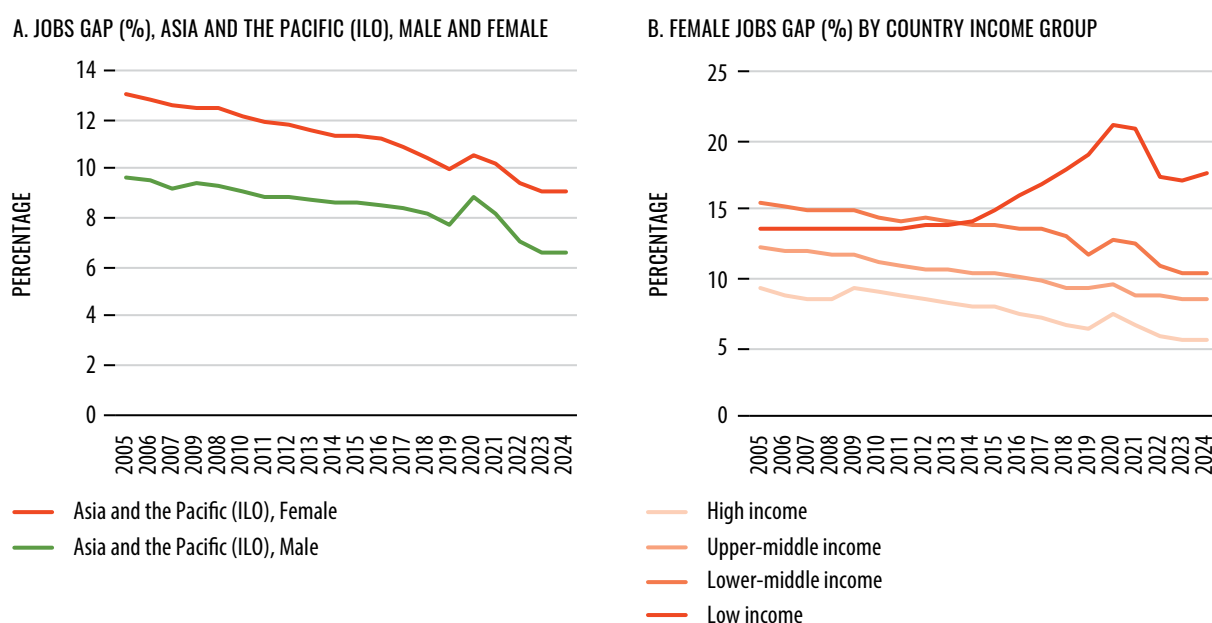
40 In the Asia-Pacific context, where large numbers of workers cannot afford to be unemployed as they lack access to social protection, the unemployment rate is an insufficient indicator of gender inequalities in the labour market. In order to be classified as unemployed, a person needs to be actively 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

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 heterogeneous 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).

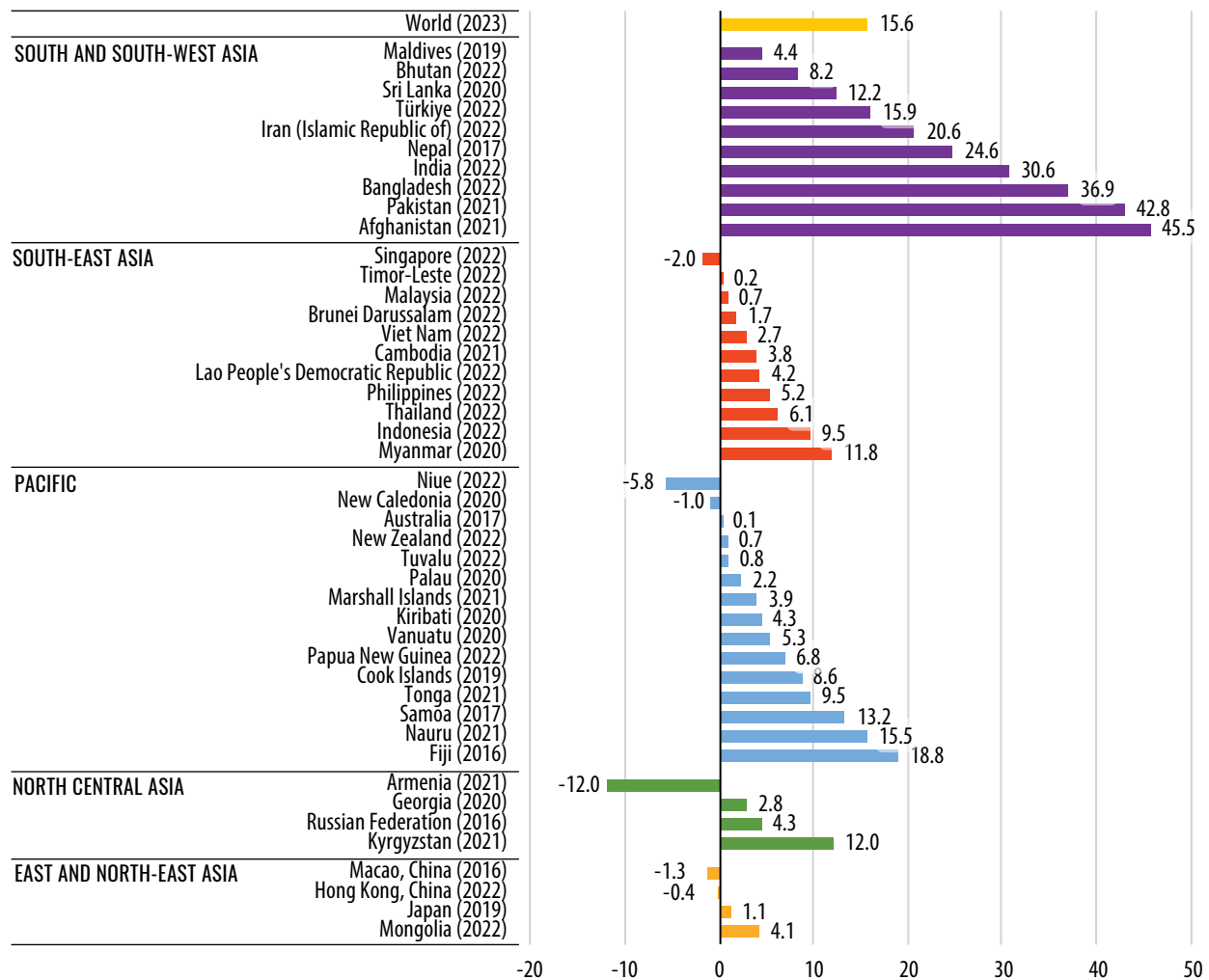
While the female youth NEET rate in Asia and the Pacific has modestly declined in the long term, it remains concerningly high, especially in low and lower-middle income countries. Overall, the region's female NEET rates declined from 38.4 per cent in 2005 (earliest available year) to 32.2 per cent in 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

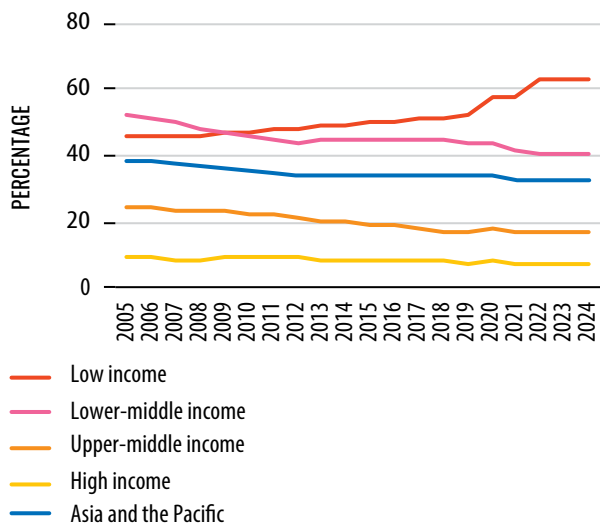
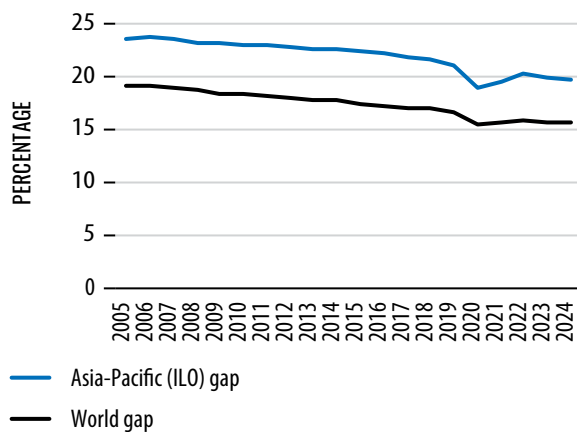
Occupational segregation between women and men is deeply rooted in gender bias and stereotypes in the world of work. Over the past three decades, gender-based occupational segregation has increased in the region. Sectors related to education, social health and care, and family are typically feminized, 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

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)**

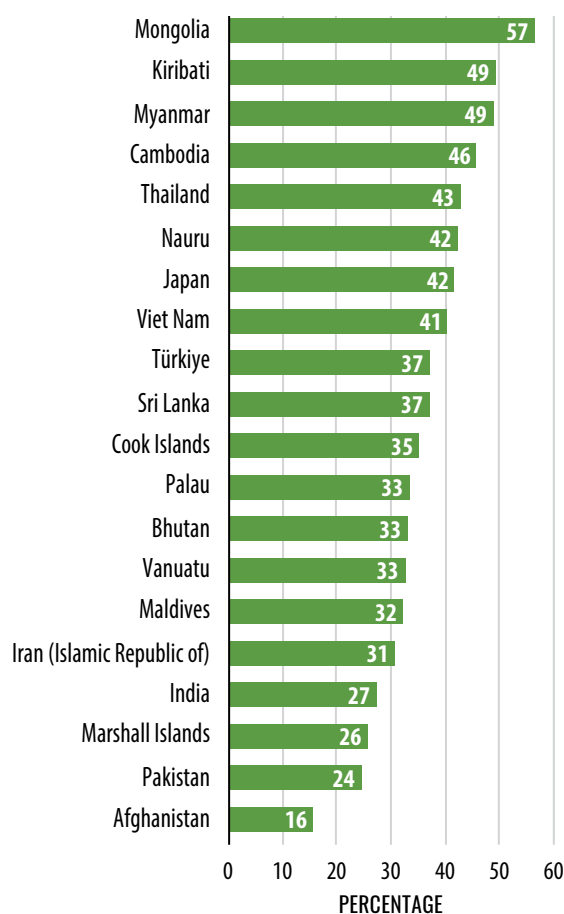
Source: ILOSTAT. ILO Modelled Estimates (the gender gap is an ESCAP elaboration). (Accessed 30 January 2024.) Low-income countries in this estimate include only Afghanistan and Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Interpretation with caution is recommended.

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 work⁵³ 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

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).

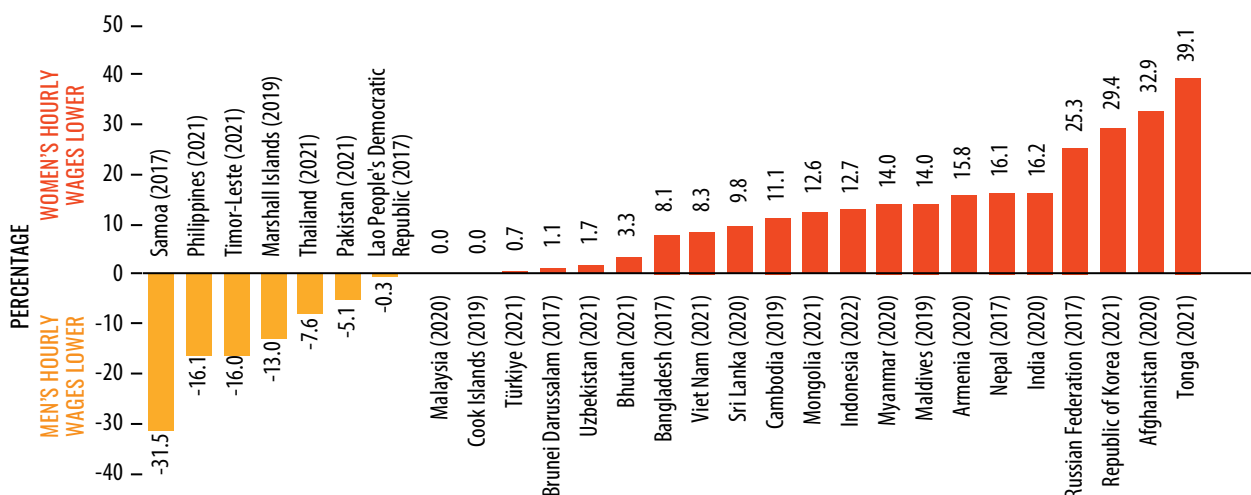
58 Mean factor weighted gender pay gap using hourly wages. ILO, *Global Wage Report 2018-2019: What lies behind gender pay gaps* (Geneva, 2018).

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: $(\text{difference in average hourly earnings between men and women} / \text{average hourly earnings men}) \times 100$.

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 region⁷⁴ 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 Toipoto 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 Toipoto* 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

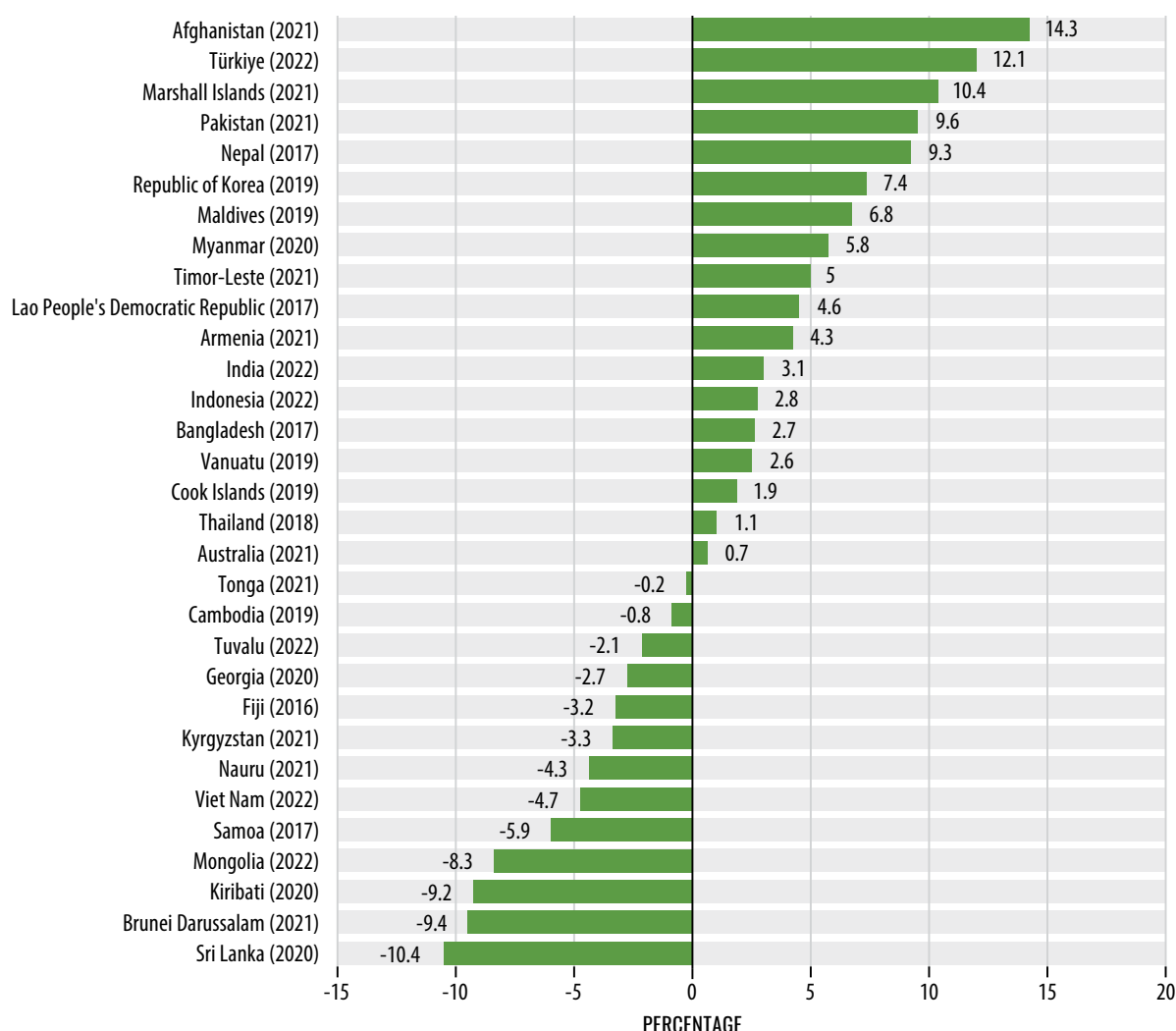
commonly concentrated in the informal sector of the economy, particularly in care work (including domestic workers).⁷⁹ Over the life course, the exposure to informality follows a U-shaped curve, with young people aged 15–24 and older workers aged over 65 being the most likely to be in informal employment, 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



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 of 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 Asia⁸⁶ 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 from 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/?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/?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).

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

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", McKinsey 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.

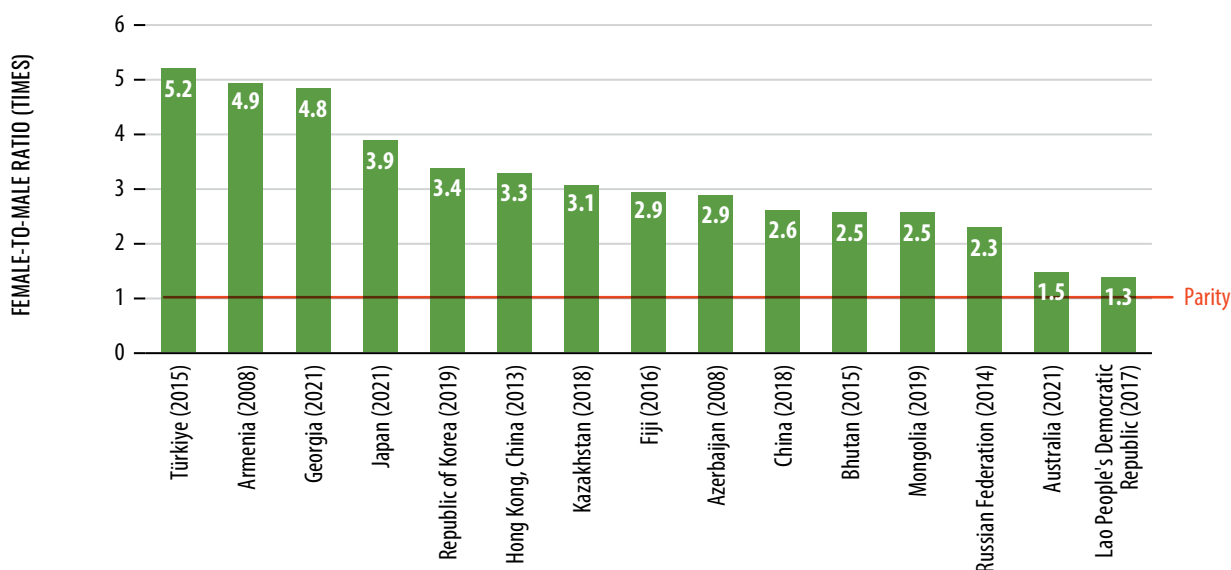
126 ILO, "Resolution concerning decent work and care in the economy", ILC 112/ Resolution V (Geneva, 2023).

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 region¹³⁸ 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 implicitly. 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 girls¹⁴¹ 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

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

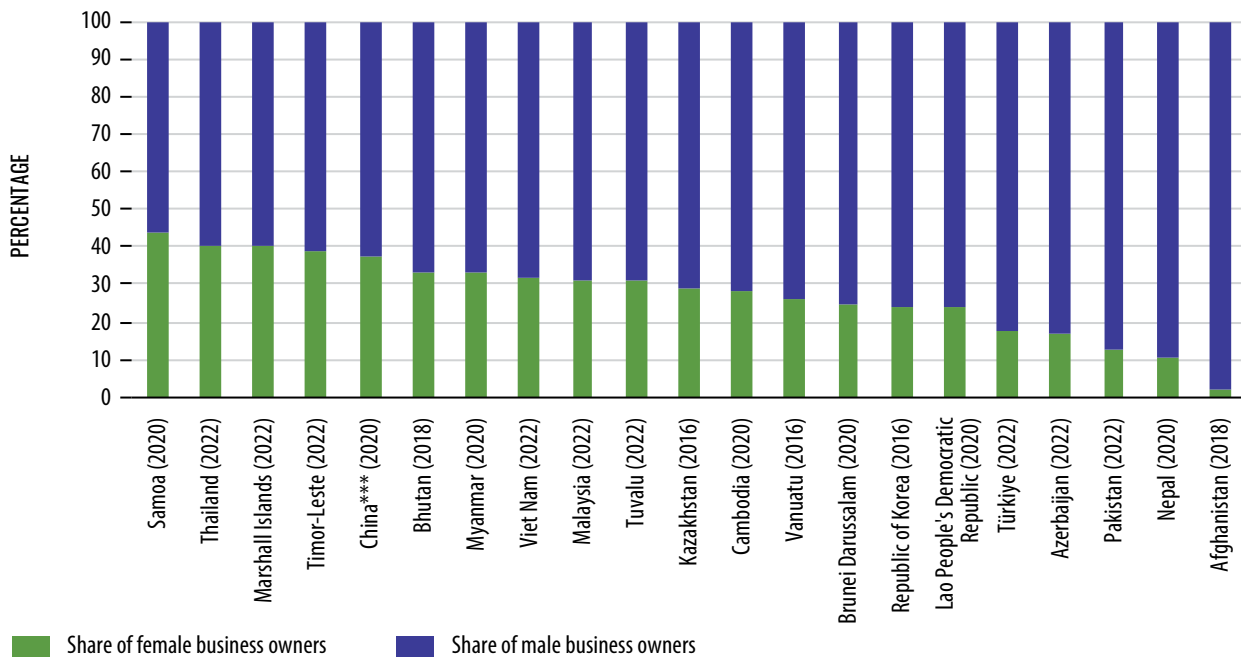
156 World Bank We-Fi Database. Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/entrepreneurship/gender> (accessed on 14 June 2024).

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.

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.

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.

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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.

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