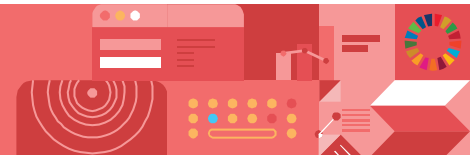


Policy Paper

December/ 2022



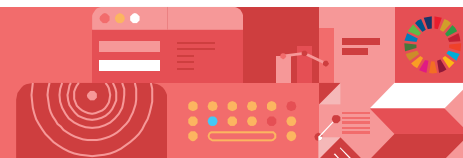
Female Labour Force Participation and the Care Economy in Asia and the Pacific



Acknowledgments

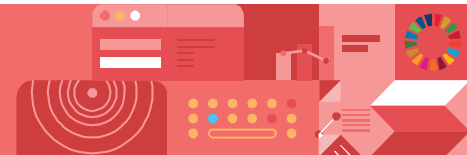
This policy paper on Female Labour Force Participation and the Care Economy in Asia and the Pacific was prepared under the overall guidance of Srinivas Tata, Director, Social Development Division, ESCAP. Cai Cai, Chief of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Section, ESCAP Social Development Division, led the drafting team comprising Mitsy Barriga Ramos and Channe Lindstrøm Oguzhan. Valuable inputs were provided by Ding Hua and Arianna Guidolin.

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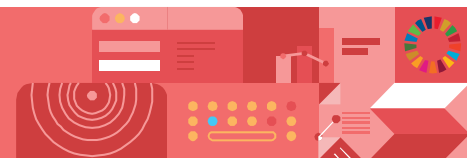
List of Abbreviations and Accronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
FLFP	Female Labour Force Participation
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ILO	International Labour Organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SME	Small and Medium (sized) Entrepreneurs



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1 Executive Summary

In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) target 5.4 “recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate” calls States to take action and promote equal distribution of paid and unpaid work in households to achieve gender equality and sustainable development. The care economy, which has gained significant attention in political agendas in the last years, consists of both paid and unpaid care work. Care work involves direct care tasks such as caring for dependents – children, family members who are sick, older persons and persons with a disability – as well as indirect care tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, domestic work and the collection of fuelwood and water. While females participation in the labour market has increased in Asia and the Pacific, women continue to spend four times more on unpaid care work compared to men.

This policy brief examines the low rate of female labour force participation in Asia and the Pacific and its correlation with persistent inequalities in the distribution of care responsibilities between men and women as well as the society and the State. The research presented here highlights the critical role of unpaid care work in the promotion of female participation in the labour market. It focuses on a care economy lens to shed light on the benefits that increasing female labour force participation represents for sustainable economic growth in Asia and the Pacific. It concludes with a call for action to invest in the care economy to build a more equal society in which care responsibilities are equally shared in households and care-related policies, services, infrastructure, and employment policies are promoted to positively affect economic growth and GDP in the region.

Three key findings emerge from this policy brief. First, an overview of females’ labour force participation rates shows the relation between low women’s labour participation and gender bias and segmentation in the formal and informal sectors in the region. Second, a care economy lens is crucial for the analysis of gender gaps in labour force participation in the region. Women’s time allocation in unpaid care work is a key source of inequality between women’s and men’s participation in the labour market. And so is the motherhood penalty that women encounter in the labour market and the lack of care-related policies which emphasise cultural and social expectations of women as family caregivers. Third, the centrality of the care economy to enhance female labour force participation is not only significant to redress gender inequalities but also to promote economic growth. Investing in the care economy is a transformative measure to increase female labour force participation while boosting economic growth and GDP. In doing so, the priorities for action should enhance policy measures based on four care-sensitive policy categories: care infrastructure, care-related social protection, care services and employment-related care policies to expand family-friendly arrangements, avoid motherhood penalties, and engage more women in quality jobs in the labour market.



The strong correlation between promoting labour force participation and investing in the care economy calls into question the effectiveness of past and current care-related policies, social and cultural norms, gender division of labour, and the role of more gendered-economic measures for inclusive and sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific.

2 Introduction

Even if significant advances have been made to enhance gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in Asia and the Pacific, the female labour force participation has decreased by nearly 10 per cent between 1990 and 2021 in the region.¹ The latest data show that the labour force participation of women of 25 years of age and older is 48.5 per cent, compared to 83.4 per cent among men of the same age group.² Yet, approximately 64 per cent of women workers in Asia and the Pacific are employed in the informal sector, which leaves them with low-paid and highly vulnerable jobs and no social protection (ESCAP 2019a).

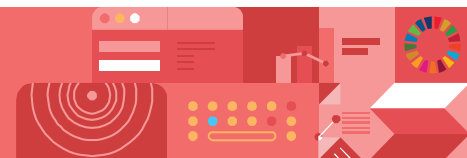
Women's engagement in the labour market, in both formal and informal sectors, overlaps with their care responsibilities. In Asia and the Pacific, the time women spend in paid and unpaid care and domestic work is the highest among all regions in the world. In contrast to men, women spend four times more than men on unpaid care and domestic work and have to combine paid work with this disproportionate burden of unpaid work (ESCAP 2021b). An estimated \$3.8 trillion could be added to the economy if the unpaid care and domestic work of women were added to the GDP measurements of Asia and the Pacific.³ Given the persistence of gender roles and social norms, women not only bear the greater load of unpaid care and domestic work but are also predicted to limit their labour force participation because of it.

To assess the unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work between women and men and its linkage to low female labour force participation, this policy brief addresses the economic value of unpaid care work from a care economy lens in Asia and the Pacific. It highlights current trends and challenges that women face in the labour market due to their time allocation in unpaid care and domestic work, the motherhood wage penalty, and the lack of care-related policies in the region. This policy brief aims to shed light on the benefits of investing in the care economy to increase the female labour force participation and the region's GDP by promoting a balanced sharing of paid work and family responsibilities at home and between families and the State. In doing so, it outlines several recommendations to support countries in Asia and the Pacific to enhance more equal and affordable care services, flexible family-work arrangements, quality of care jobs, and remove social and economic barriers that prevent women from accessing and remaining in the labour market.

¹ The general trend has been calculated considering the ESCAP subregions based on ILO Labour Statistics Database.

² The latest data available is from 2019 [ESCAP SDG Gateway](#) based on ILOSTAT Database.


³ These has been calculated by the McKinsey Global Institute in 2018.



3 Overview

Women in Asia and the Pacific have been important drivers of progress and economic growth over the past decades. They have been at the heart of development shifts, from higher educational achievement, reduced child mortality, industrialization, increased household income, and a significant decrease in poverty. Not only women's paid work but also their unpaid and domestic work has helped transform their communities and economies. Yet, compared to men, women continue to encounter multiple challenges in participating equally in the labour market, face more responsibilities in unpaid care work due to gender roles and do not enjoy fair returns for their contribution (ESCAP 2019a, 2019b, 2021a, 2021b). Moreover, work has been typically thought of as an economic activity that involves production, distribution and consumption of goods and services. A crucial difference was made by the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ILO 2013) and expanded the concept of work to 'any activity performed by persons of any sex and age to produce goods or to provide services for use by others or for own use' (ILO 2013). The relevance of acknowledging work in this sense is that it has changed the way work is both recognised and measured. Most specifically, a broad economic unit has been identified within work and has included households and monetary as well as non-monetary transactions. However, women's unpaid care and domestic work is commonly seen as women 'not working' which dismisses its valuable economic and social implications. Unpaid care and domestic work refers to both *direct care tasks*—care for children, elderly, sick persons, or persons with disability—and *indirect care tasks*—cooking, cleaning, collection of fuelwood and water, food provisioning and household maintenance (ESCAP 2021a). While unpaid care and domestic work represents a direct and indirect subsidy to the formal sector and to the well-being of individuals, it is commonly left out of policy agendas due to a common misconception according to which it is too difficult to measure and less relevant for policies (OECD 2014).

Notwithstanding gender-inclusive development concerning paid and unpaid work in the past years in Asia and the Pacific, gender gaps in economic participation continue to be a matter of concern (ESCAP 2019a). Women in the region work the longest hours (paid and unpaid work) in the world. They spend on average 11 hours a day on unpaid and domestic work, which is more than four times the amount of time compared to men (ESCAP 2019a). This represents serious implications for outcomes such as gender gaps in earnings and women's economic and political participation. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, women have been positioned in a more vulnerable situation compared to men. It has been especially critical for those working in the informal sector and in sectors over-represented by women such as front-line health care, domestic work, services, hospitality, education, and retail industries, which have faced more risks and vulnerabilities. The pandemic has exacerbated traditional gender roles and increased women's time allocation on household chores such as cleaning, cooking, caring for the elderly, and home-schooling children (ESCAP 2021b). Thus, many of the gender inequalities, existing even before the pandemic, have been further deepened. The often-overlooked socioeconomic value of unpaid care work has gained attention in recovery responses and moved to centre stage in global policy agendas. Yet, a shift



towards a care economy is needed not only to address the complexity of women's paid and unpaid work, but also to emphasise its correlation with the low and unequal female participation in the labour market in Asia and the Pacific.

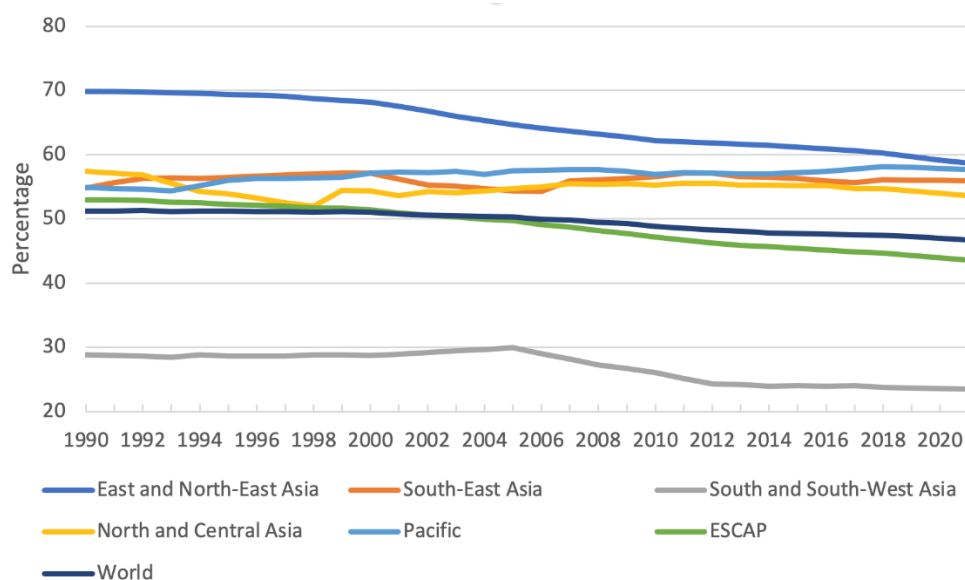
Using a care economy lens, this policy brief argues that unpaid care and domestic work impact women's participation in the labour force and the economic and sustainable growth in Asia and the Pacific. In doing so, section 2 provides an overview of the female labour force participation rates in Asia and the Pacific. Section 3 analyses the gender gap in correlation with gender inequalities in unpaid care work, mainly by focusing on women's time allocation, the motherhood gap and motherhood penalty, and the lack of care-related policies. Section 4 sheds light on the benefits of investing in the care economy following a care-sensitive policy framework set forth by ESCAP on the care economy. Section 5 emphasises the role of a care economy in the GDP growth in the region. Finally, section 6 proposes some policy recommendations to lift the constraints on women's time by both reducing women's unpaid care work and redistributing the caring responsibilities between women and men as well as the family and the State.

4 Female labour force participation rates in Asia and the Pacific

Differences in male-female gaps in labour force participation vary across the region due to the disparity across subregional economies, institutional changes, labour market and social opportunities, a decline in fertility, cultural norms, and the allocation of women's time in paid and unpaid work, among others. For instance, in 2015, the female labour force participation rate in South Asia was 35 per cent while in East Asia and the Pacific was 64 per cent—the highest in the world (ADB 2015). The disparity is especially considerable in South Asia, with a percentage of 78.9 per cent for men and only 39.9 per cent for women (ILO 2019). In East Asia and the Pacific women's labour force participation had been decreasing even before the pandemic. In 2019, 58.8 per cent of women were in the labour force, compared to 79 per cent of men (ADB 2021).

Over the past 30 years, the overall female labour force participation in the Asia-Pacific subregions has decreased by nearly 10 per cent, falling below 50 per cent in 2006 and continued the downtrend since then (see Figure 1). The North and North-East Asia (NEEA) shows the sharpest decrease in female labour force participation, from 70 per cent in 1990 to lower than 60 per cent in 2021. Furthermore, a significant gap in female labour force participation exists between South and South-West Asia (SSWA) and the other four subregions, which underlines the need for more efforts to strengthen women's economic empowerment in that region.

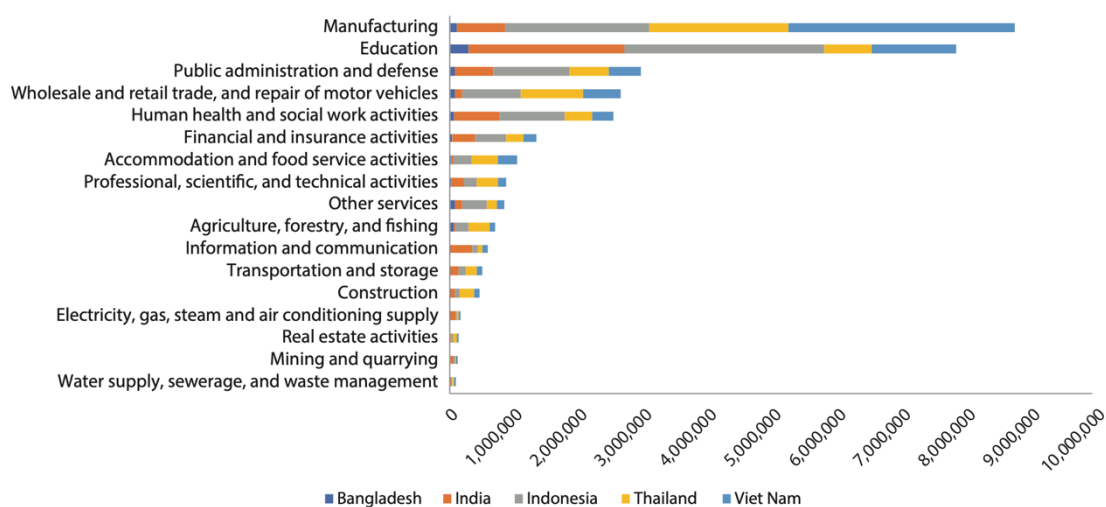
Figure 1: Female labour force participation (aged 15+) by ESCAP subregion from 1900 to 2021



Source: Adapted from ESCAP 2019a, based on ILO Labour Statistics Database

Some key challenges to improve female labour force participation in the region include gender bias in the segmentation of jobs and women's underrepresentation in higher-paid jobs. In some countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia (see figure 2), women mainly work in industries such as manufacturing, education, public administration and defence, wholesale and retail trade, and repair of motor vehicle

Figure 2: Women in formal employment by industry in selected countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia



Source: ADB 2021, adapted from Park 2021



In ASEAN countries, when it comes to overall female representation measured by the percentage of women in management positions, women make up only 24 per cent of middle and senior managers in the private sector, and only 20 per cent of seats in parliament are occupied by women (UN Women & Women Count 2021). Along with strong sectoral and occupational segregations as well as gender gaps, high levels of informality exacerbate gender inequalities in labour force participation in the region. While a considerable proportion of men are present in the informal sector, women's work concentrates in the poorest levels of informal employment. Outside the agricultural sector, most employment opportunities for women in the Asia-Pacific region are informal (ESCAP 2017). Approximately 64 per cent of women workers in the region are employed in the informal sector (ILO 2018b). From street vendors and domestic workers to retail, garment and seasonal agricultural workers, women in the informal economy not only lack social protections and earn lower wages than men, but they also work under unsafe conditions and are often at risk of sexual harassment (ASEAN 2019, ILO 2018a). Nonetheless, employment in the informal sector offers flexibility, fewer hours and working close to home which is crucial for women for balancing home with work (ESCAP 2019b).

These differences in male-female participation in the labour force are not surprising but they are often forgotten or ignored by policymakers. The strong correlation between how women and men spend their time in unpaid care and domestic work and the differences in the labour force participation rates are further emphasised by socio-economic factors. The poorer the people are, the less they are in the position to buy various goods and services from the market, i.e., they can only consume what they produce. Thus, in addition to having to work often long hours in paid work for lower wages, women must also engage in unpaid work to meet the essential consumption needs of their families.

5 Addressing the gender gap in labour force participation from a care economy lens

The unequal female labour participation places significant emphasis on how women allocate their time between paid and unpaid work, i.e., between the labour market and family as well as between pursuing a career and persisting gender roles and bias. Applying a care economy lens to frame both paid and unpaid dimensions of female labour force participation in Asia and the Pacific is essential to understand and address the perpetuation of gender inequalities in the labour force.

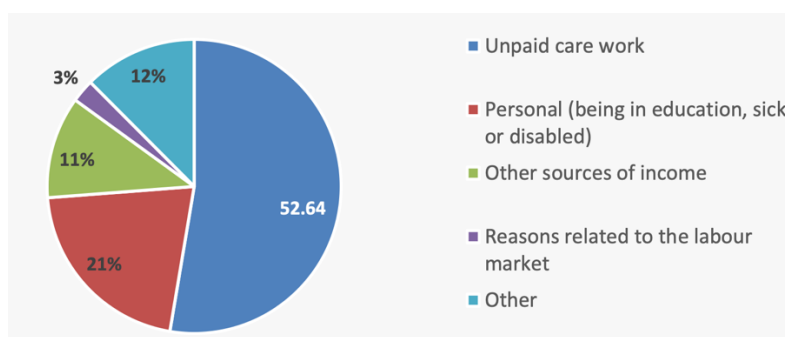
The care economy is a caring economy. It refers to both paid and unpaid dimensions of female labour force participation. and. Every day individuals spend time in care and domestic unpaid work. However, women spend disproportionately more time on unpaid care work than men. To address the gender gap in labour force participation from a care economy lens, this section pays

attention to women's time allocation in unpaid care and domestic work, the motherhood pay gap, and the role of care-related policies in the region.

5.1 Women's time allocation in unpaid care and domestic work


One of the key sources of inequality between women's and men's participation in the labour force is the amount of time women allocate to unpaid care and domestic work. Indeed, women tend to have less time for labour market activities due to unpaid care and domestic work—which tends to make their own time less predictable and search for jobs with flexible working arrangements (part-time or informal jobs). The gender division of unpaid care work determines the quantity and quality of women's paid employment and is one of the main reasons why women are outside the labour force (see figure 3). In Asia and the Pacific, around 400 million women or 52.64 per cent of the 770 million inactive women belonging to the working age population stay out of the labour force and cite unpaid care responsibilities as one of the main reasons for staying out of the labour market (ESCAP 2019b). In contrast, only 26 million or 7.88 per cent of men stay outside the labour force for the same reason.

Figure 3: Percentage of inactive persons, by main reason for being outside the labour force, women aged 15+



Source: ESCAP calculations based on ILO 2018a

In Asia and the Pacific, women perform more than 4 times more unpaid care work than men (ILO 2018a). Men perform the lowest share of unpaid care work of all regions (1 hour and 4 minutes), with 28 minutes in Pakistan or 8 per cent of men's total working time and only 31 minutes in India or 7.9 per cent (ILO 2018b). The Arab States is the region of the world characterized as having the lowest participation rate for women and men in paid work (36 minutes and 3 hours 42 minutes per day, respectively) and the second-lowest regional participation for men in unpaid care work, 1 hour and 10 minutes (ILO 2018a). Even in countries where female labour force participation is high, women tend to allocate more time to unpaid work. For example, in China the women's labour force participation rates are high and most working-age women join the labour force on a full-time basis after completing school. Despite women work nearly as many hours as men in the workplace,



domestic chores, and care for children and other family members remain primarily the responsibilities of women (Dong & Qi 2015).

There are, nonetheless, variations in the patterns of time allocation in unpaid care work. Among women themselves, some—mostly migrants and women living in rural areas—spend significantly more time engaged in unpaid care work than others, depending on disadvantages based on gender, class, race and location, disability, HIV status, and nationality, among others. This is even worse for women living in poverty who are required to perform unpaid care and domestic work and perform paid work under precarious circumstances. The wealthier people are, the more financial means a household spend to buy goods—such as processed food, prepared fuel, and labour-service devices—, and care-related services. Thus, if a household cannot afford to pay for goods and services, in addition to working long hours, women must engage in the production of these goods and services themselves. As a result, women who work in paid jobs are commonly said to work a “second shift” or experience a “double day”, one at home and one at work (ILO 2018a).

5.2 Motherhood gap and motherhood penalty

Globally, when men and women finish school and start working, they tend to be paid equally. A gender pay gap soon appears and grows significantly over the next two decades of their lives. The significant proportion of the gender pay gap for women with children has been commonly referred to as the *motherhood pay gap* (Bernard & Correll 2010). It refers to the pay gap between mothers and non-mothers. The so-called *motherhood penalty*⁴ describes the problems that women face in the labour force when having children due to biased views of mothers as less productive or stereotypical hiring and promotion decisions that penalize the careers of mothers, labour market interruptions or reduction in working time, and employment in family-friendly jobs with flexible working hours that are low-paying (ILO 2018c, 2018d). Especially women with young children are less likely to be employed, work in managerial or leadership positions, and suffer a wage penalty compared to women without children (ESCAP 2019b). In Indonesia, for instance, while young single women aged 15-24 have the highest rate of economic participation, the biggest drop in the labour force is seen just after marriage in anticipation of having children (UNDP & UNICEF 2021).

Around the world, women with young children (aged 0-5 years) account for the lowest employment to population rate (47.6 per cent) compared to men with children (87.9 per cent), men without children (78.2 per cent), and women without children (54.4 per cent) (ILO 2018a). In Asia and the Pacific (see figure 4), while only 51 per cent of women with children and 55.5 per cent of women without children are employed, 78.5 per cent of men without children and 87.5 per cent of men

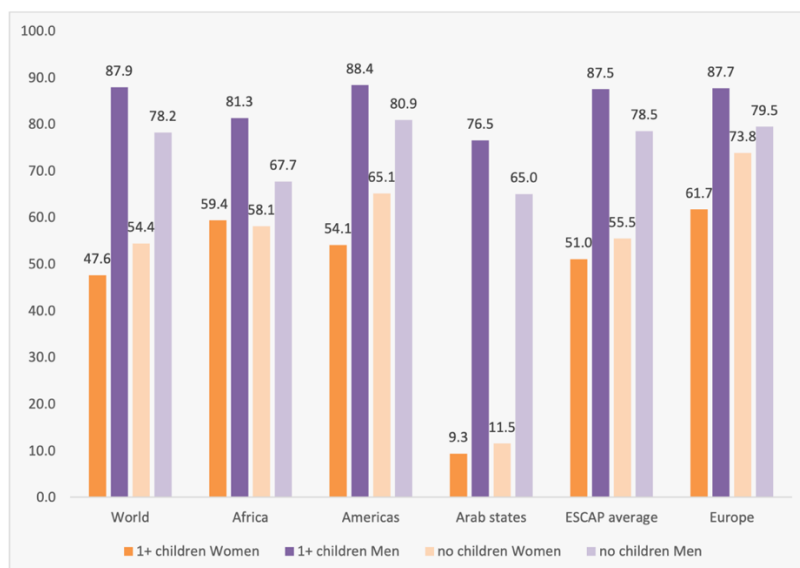
⁴ This term has been coined by sociologists. See for example Budig & England. (2001), Anderson et al. (2003), Correl et al. (2007) and Benard & Paik (2008), and Staff & Mortimer (2012).

with children are employed. In the ESCAP region, excluding the Arab States, the difference between the employment-to-population ratio for men and women without children aged 0-5 years is 23 per cent (ESCAP 2019b).

Women with children not only experience additional disadvantages in the labour force market compared to women without children but also in contrast to men with children. Men with children have a high employment-to-population and are often offered higher salaries than men without children. This trend is known as *the fatherhood bonus* (ILO 2018a).

Evidence that mothers suffer wage penalties over and above the penalty for being a woman raises concerns not only for gender equality but also for the capacity of societies to manage a sustainable balance between their economic aims of active female participation in paid work and the social aims of a fair distribution of income to support the reproduction and nurture of children (ILO 2015). Caring and parenting are not unique women's responsibilities and should not only be shared equally between men and women but also guaranteed through care-related policies in society to ensure women's equal participation in the labour force.


Figure 4: Employment-to-population ratios of women and men with children and women and men without children aged 0-5 years.



Source: ESCAP 2019b, adapted from ILO 2018a

5.3 Care-related policies

Since women are culturally and socially expected to be family caregivers, unpaid domestic and care work is a major factor impacting women's economic empowerment and participation in the



labour market. The large demand imposed by care and domestic work combined with poor quality and inaccessible care-related services is likely to have a negative impact on the employment rates and working conditions of women, who may face a trade-off between working -often in the informal economy- and providing care (ILO 2018a). A care economy lens not only serves to redress gender gaps but also brings more jobs and higher productivity. Improving the work-life balance of workers through care-related policies benefits both the parents and society. Minimum standards for family leave, flexible working hours, and care-related services promote an equal sharing of caring responsibilities between parents and free girls and women from care responsibilities. In doing so, it contributes to enhancing women's potential in the labour market and enhances an inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

Countries in the region have strengthened legislative measures regarding equality in the workplace, developed laws, policies, and programmes to achieve work-life balance and supported the transition of informal sector workers into the formal sector (ESCAP 2019a). While 24 countries have introduced or strengthened various types of family leave to provide significant benefits to working mothers, as well as their children, partners, families, and communities, 44 countries mandate maternity leave and 14 countries paternity leave (ESCAP 2019a). In the Russian Federation, women who have taken maternity leave for up to three years are provided professional training and retraining to improve their employment chances upon their return. In the Republic of Korea, women's re-employment centres provide counselling and vocational training for women whose careers have been interrupted (ESCAP 2019a). Despite these efforts, only a small percentage of policies and a small budget aim at addressing women's unpaid care needs in the region (ESCAP 2021a). According to the Asian Development Bank (2019), across all categories of social protection expenditures in ASEAN countries, expenditure on women (as a percentage of GDP) continues to be relatively low.

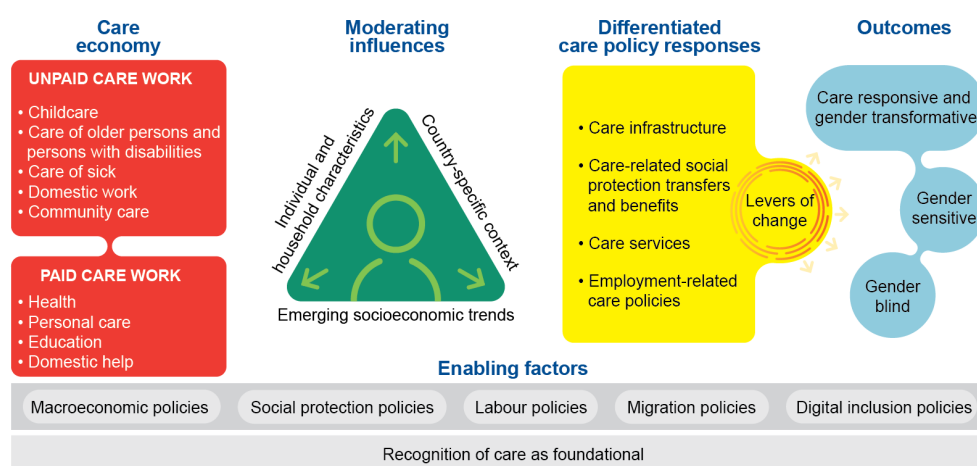
Along with governments, companies and business must do their fair share in supporting the redistribution of care work and adopt family-friendly practices such as flexible working conditions, parental leave benefits—for both men and women, and uphold minimum social protections based on a care economy. This means one which recognizes care as foundational for advancing a sustainable economy. To this end, a care-sensitive policy framework set forth by ESCAP (2021a) on the care economy (see figure 5) encourages taking an intersectional lens to women based on their multiple identities and social locations and promotes the investment in care policies to recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work in the form of money, services and time.⁵ As the figure

⁵ This is known as the Triple R Framework – recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care and domestic work to expand the call made in the Beijing Platform for Action for recognition and valuation, typically interpreted as measurement, by including a concrete economic justice dimension. “Recognizing” unpaid care work involves bringing to an end society's habitual practice of taking it for granted and challenging the social norms and gender stereotypes that undervalue it and make it invisible in policy design and implementation. “Reducing” unpaid care work means shortening the time devoted to such work when it involves drudgery, primarily by improving infrastructure. “Redistributing” unpaid care work means changing its distribution between women and men, but also between households and society as a whole (ILO 2018a).

shows, individual and household characteristics, country-specific political, socio-economic contexts, and the larger emerging demographic and societal trends all mediate women's participation in the care economy –either in paid care or unpaid care and domestic work. To comprehensively address the needs of women arising from their locations on differentiated social axis, the conceptual framework proposes *four* care-sensitive policy categories which can together account for and address the different care tasks usually performed by women. These four categories are outlined as follows:

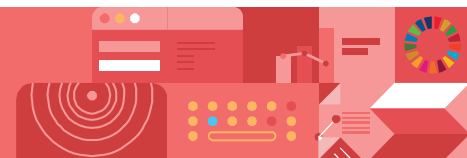
1. **Care infrastructure** — water, sanitation, energy, transport, food services, health care infrastructure for persons who are sick (HIV patients, COVID-19 patients) or living with a disability and pregnant women.
2. **Care-related social protections** — cash transfers, cash for care, vouchers, tax benefits, non-contributory pension schemes.
3. **Care services** — childcare, older person care and care provisions for persons with disability or illness through the State or the market.
4. **Employment-related care policies** — sick leave, family-friendly working arrangements, flexitime, career breaks, sabbaticals, severance pay, employer-funded or contributory social protection schemes like maternity and parental leave benefits.

Figure 5: Conceptual framework for care-sensitive and gender-differentiated policies



Source: ESCAP 2021b

The entire framework is premised on the fundamental recognition of care as foundational to human life and the need for governments to develop an eco-system of macro-policies on the economy, social protection, digital and financial inclusion, labour markets, and migration to provide a suitable context within which care is addressed.



6 Priorities for action: The benefits of investing in the care economy

Given the centrality of care to human life and society, care regulatory frameworks and government-targeted measures are needed to redress the gender pay gaps and promote laws on safe and decent work to protect women's employment in urban and rural areas to enhance female participation in the labour market. Policies for development and growth that lack targeted measures aimed at improving women's employment prospects will fail to realize the full potential of a productive economy (ILO 2019a).

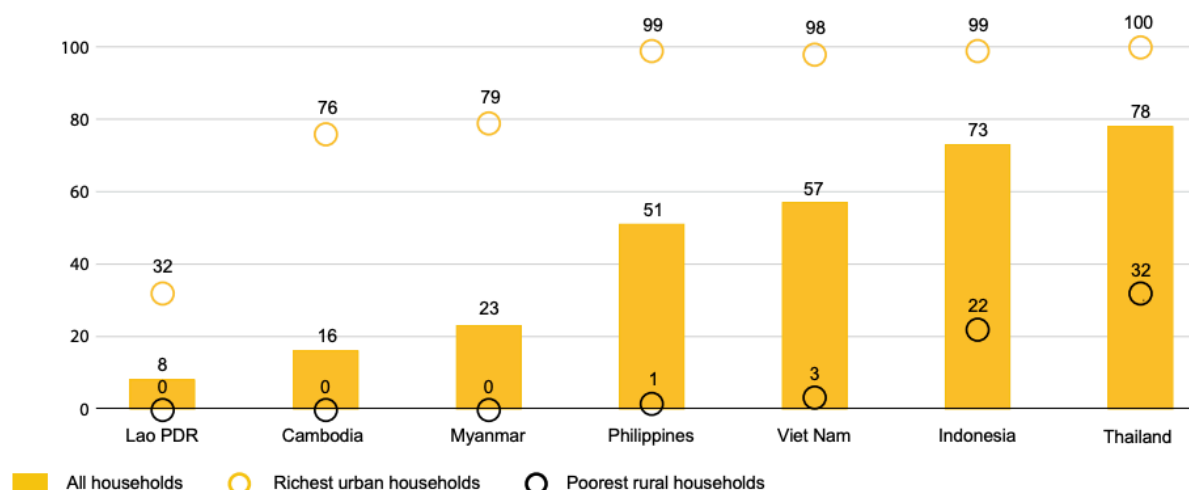
6.1 Improving care infrastructure

Care infrastructure such as water, transport, sanitation, and clean energy—especially in rural areas, is critically linked to women's time poverty and how they allocate their time in paid and unpaid work. In countries in the region, children of both sexes spent 15 hours a week collecting fuelwood or water (ESCAP 2019b). Assessing and promoting investments in the care economy including accessible and sustainable care-relevant infrastructure such as access to water for irrigation, energy, transport, and information and communications technology serves to address the practical challenges of people's time poverty and identify the needs of target populations. According to the 2022 Commission on the Status of Women, gender-responsive water and sanitation services and infrastructure are key to bolstering the resilience and capacities of all women and girls. They are also functional to address the need to expand access to adequate sanitation facilities including menstrual health and hygiene, especially for those in vulnerable situations (UN 2022).

The increased prosperity in the region has led to a large proportion of urban populations living in slums in many developing countries in Asia and the Pacific. For example, the majority of slum dwellers in Cambodia and Myanmar are women and they struggle with water collection and cooking with harmful fuels. 36 per cent of women slum residents cook with unclean fuel, compared to 15 per cent of their urban counterparts (ESCAP 2021a). While women slum residents cope with tensions between their paid work and household tasks by reducing their leisure time, urban women manage their care responsibilities by reducing their time spent on market work (ESCAP 2021a). Thus, geographical location has a significant impact on women's access to care infrastructure and limits their social and economic opportunities in society. Some of the poorest women in Thailand, living in the rural north-eastern region, are 80 times as likely as the richest urban women in Bangkok to lack clean cooking fuels, access to basic water and sanitation facilities, be five times as likely to be education-poor and three times as likely to marry early (Duerto-Valero, Kaul and Chanchai 2021). In ASEAN countries (see figure 6), the difference in access to clean fuels for cooking is based on wealth and location. An average of 28 per cent of women in ASEAN countries

live in households that primarily use wood as a cooking fuel (ESCAP 2021a). Box 1 gives an example of how a care infrastructure has been incorporated in Cambodia

Figure 6: Access to clean fuels for cooking in the ASEAN Member States in 2021



Source: Duerto-Valero, Kaul and Chanchai 2021, p. 23. Based on UN Women calculations from Demographic and Health Surveys and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys


Box 1: Investing in care infrastructure in Cambodia

The Ministry of Rural Development has made important progress in promoting access to water supply, sanitation, and rehabilitating roads in rural areas, in line with the National Strategic Plan for Rural Water Supply Sanitation and Hygiene 2014-2025. Additionally, the Ministry of Rural Development has also rehabilitated rural roads to make travel easier for everyone and create better access to health centres, schools, markets, and employment opportunities. It has contributed to the reduction of poverty and enabled women to have more time for income-generating activities and participating in their communities.

Source: [Cambodia National Review Report 2019](#)

6.2 Increasing female labour force participation through care-related social protection

Considering that women surpass men in educational level in many countries, investing in their talent by advancing women's care-related social protection programmes can be justified through a cost-benefit analysis and GDP growth. Despite many countries in the region have put in place



social insurance and social assistance programmes with large recipients of cash transfers, there is still a gap at an overall level and the actual reach of programmes that recognized the care-differentiated needs of women and their intersectional vulnerabilities (ESCAP 2021a). Since women tend to take the largest share of parental leave entitlements, they miss a long period of time away from work which affects their career progression as well as their pensions and increases the wage gap (ILO 2022).

According to ESCAP (2021a), ASEAN member states have much lower levels of public expenditure on social protection programmes than the Asia-Pacific regional average and the global average. Most ASEAN member states support contributory social insurance schemes, but a large number of women cannot benefit from them because they work in the informal sector. As recipients of social assistance, women benefit directly from maternity (pregnancy and lactation) or child welfare grants and (non-conditional) cash transfers. Nonetheless, not all policy intentions always translate into benefits for women working in the formal sector or reduce their demands of time and energy in household work. For example, conditional cash transfers often impede women from accessing the benefits because they do not meet the conditionalities such as immunization of children, pre- and antenatal check-ups, among others (Chopra 2018). Maternity protection should be a public good and a collective responsibility that benefits women regardless of these conditionalities and women's labour force status. Unconditional cash transfers and non-contributory social assistance to women offer an option for women who do not qualify for benefits or are out of social insurance. Not only supporting mothers and infants is critical to a child's well-being and future educational achievement, but also to tackle the motherhood employment penalty and the wage gap that women with small children face (ESCAP 2021a).

Box 2: Myanmar's Maternal and Cash Transfer Programme

A promising practice of Maternal and Child Cash Transfer Programme has been promoted by Myanmar's National Social Protection Strategic Plan. It has been rolled out in several states with levels of nutrition deprivation and is focused on the need of women, children, and vulnerable groups through a maternal and child health voucher, child transfer programmes, and conditional and unconditional cash transfers benefits to mothers. Conditional cash transfers includes all women eligible (pregnant women and mothers of children under 12 months) in targeted villages regardless of poverty criteria, whereas the Maternal and Child Health Voucher Scheme (MCHVS) prioritizes women in low-income households who cannot afford to access health services and live in remote areas. The MCHVS provides vouchers for mothers to cover transport cost to health facilities for antenatal care, delivery assisted by skilled birth attendants, and immunization of their children. Unconditional cash transfers are provided for internally displaced persons in Rakhine and Kachin states. In 2018, US\$ 9.9 million was spent on the Cash Transfer Programme, where 46 per cent of all beneficiaries received unconditional cash transfers and 51 per cent of all cash transfer beneficiaries were women.

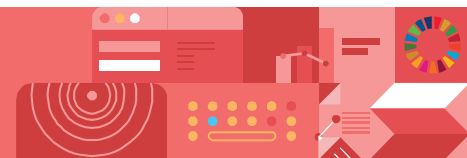
Source: [Myanmar National Review Report 2020](#)



6.3 Promoting care-related services

Spending on childcare provision, and care services for older persons and persons with disabilities could narrow the gender employment gap by preventing and eliminating discrimination based on maternity and family responsibilities (ILO 2022). While men and women are considered equal in Asia and the Pacific, a normative gendered division of labour assigns that the primary responsibility of childcare falls on women's shoulders. Women with children are faced with choosing between paid employment and unpaid household responsibilities such as childcare. In 2015, on average, women spend twice as much time on household work and four times more on children which provides more time for male household members to participate in the labour force (ADB 2015). Moreover, cultural norms and traditional social values in many countries of Asia and the Pacific promote the respect and care for the elderly of the family and children must support and care for their parents. In countries such as Uzbekistan, the government only provide care services for the elderly and persons with disabilities when they live alone or do not have any family caregivers (UNDP 2016).

Supporting women's and men's balancing of employment and family responsibilities through care services can yield long-term returns on investments for employers by reducing turnover rates and absenteeism and by increasing workers' labour market participation as well as motivation and productivity (ILO 2018b). Childcare services, for instance, offer many benefits for the promotion of new jobs, child development and reducing parents' unpaid care work. Likewise, with ageing societies in Asia and the Pacific, long-term care services are essential to ensure the right to healthy ageing in dignity, promote the creation of new jobs, and help to decrease women's care responsibilities for older relatives. The investment in quality care services is an integral part of social protection systems and promotes gender equality by supporting the workforce participation of workers—especially women—with caregiving responsibilities (ILO 2022). To attract more female talent to the labour force, policies should promote care-related services that allow equitable and efficient distribution of time among household members. When public policies support childcare and older person care, women can reduce the time they devote to caring for family dependents, and improve their financial flexibility, well-being, and their time allocation in paid and unpaid work. In macroeconomic terms, based on supply and demand, the provision of childcare and long-term care services for older persons i) serves to increase women's labour force participation, ii) supports future human capital development through children's education, iii) ensures the right to healthy ageing and enable workers with care responsibilities, and iv) leads to the creation of comparatively better quality jobs and makes a vital contribution to human capital creation. The investment in care services serves to enhance women's economic empowerment and transform unpaid and informal care roles into decent work by improving their working conditions and wages as well as by creating opportunities for their economic empowerment through skills enhancement and career advancement (ILO 2018a, 2022).



Box 3: Responses to the challenge of population ageing

China's community-based plan and institutional care

China's 12th Five-Year Development Plan for Social Services System for Old Persons (2011–2015) has proposed to socialize eldercare services through the development of eldercare markets, nonprofit organizations, and voluntary service providers. It has promoted the construction of a health service network for older persons and incorporated health services into local development through the construction of geriatric hospitals. In doing so, the model grounded on community-based services and institutional care not only expands care services and creates new jobs but also makes attractive the implementation of care services for non-profit organizations by exempting them from income taxes. The 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) has proposed the expansion of elderly care services and the improvement of health support for the elderly.

Source: [China's 12th Five-Year Plan](#) and [China's 14th Five-Year Plan](#)

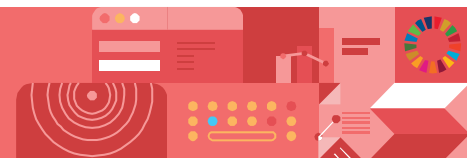
Malaysia's plan to promote care for older persons

The Department of Social Welfare (DSW) is committed to providing services including rehabilitation, care and protection by establishing institutions for older persons. There are three types of institution for older persons under the DSW which are Rumah Seri Kenangan (Homes for Older Persons), Rumah Ehsan (Home for Chronically ill) and Desa Bina Diri (Homes for Destitute). The government has also promoted activity centres for older people, a 'We Care Unit for Older Persons to provide services, transportation facilities and screening and treatments at government or private hospitals, and 'Home Help Services' for older people who live alone.

Source: [Malaysia Progress Report 2019](#)

6.4 Providing employment-related care policies

Flexible work arrangements for men and women, can increase employee productivity and benefit an equal share of unpaid care work. Extending maternity and paternity leave and providing childcare allowances can boost female participation and attract as well as retain their talent and productivity. The increment of macroeconomic and labour policies provides a basis of action to promote and enhance female participation in the labour market and create effective gender-transformative outcomes in advancing gender equality and decreasing the female-male gap in labour participation. Maximizing fiscal space expands the resources available to fund care policies and reduce and redistribute unpaid care work. If focused on care employment creation, care policies can support the expansion of overall employment and remove downward pressure on




wages for (women) care workers (ILO 2018a). The small percentage of policies aimed at addressing women's unpaid care needs and the minimal budget spent on care policies highlights the lack of attention that a care economy has in the region. Moreover, care policies are largely focused on women's maternal and childcare roles which intensify their primary role as a caregiver. And even when employment-related care policies are in place and support women, fewer women are likely to benefit because of their low representation in the formal workforce in Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP 2021a).

To fill in the gap between care-sensitive and gender-differentiated needs of women, employment-related care policies should address women's and men's care responsibilities, explicit assessment of the unequal distribution of care and domestic work, and the promotion of equal participation in the labour force market. Paternity leave, for instance, is key to enabling men's care rights and responsibilities and securing women's labour force participation. Over the past ten years, only a few countries in Asia and the Pacific have introduced paternity leave or extended existing paternity leave (ILO 2022). In 2012, Myanmar extended the duration of existing paternity leave provisions from 6 to 15 days, which is the longest in the region. More recently, in 2019, the Republic of Korea raised the paternity leave duration from three days unpaid to ten days fully paid. Other countries in Asia and the Pacific have introduced new legislations regarding paternity leave. Notable examples include the Islamic Republic of Iran, which, in 2013, introduced a 14-day (paid) paternity leave; and Nepal, which in 2017 passed new legislation establishing a 15-day paternity leave. Similarly, Viet Nam and Fiji both granted five days of leave for fathers of newborn children in 2014 and 2019, respectively (ILO 2022). The provision and promotion of paternity leave i) support the healthy recovery of the mother, and ii) are key to shifting cultural norms, care responsibilities, and work-life balance.

Parental leave is long-term leave available to parents to allow them to take care of their child after the expiration of maternity and paternity leave. While it is usually available to either parent, women generally make greater use of it which affects their return to work. Examples in the region have been set by Australia, which doubled the length of parental leave, and now entitles households to 104 weeks, of which 18 are paid at the federal minimum wage. Or the Republic of Korea, which has also increased the duration of parental leave for families from 52 to 104 weeks, which are paid at 80 per cent of previous earnings for the first three months and at 50 per cent for the following three months (ILO 2022). When both parents take parental leave, it benefits both parents and their children and favours women's return to work.

Flexible work arrangement policies such as reduced working hours with the same hourly rate and flexible working hours are also significant levers to combine work and care responsibilities for both men and women. According to a project survey in Indonesia, young women identify domestic care responsibilities as the biggest constrain to realising their economic potential (UNDP & UNICEF 2021). Women in Indonesia have high rates of informal entrepreneurship (small-scale and often home-based micro-enterprises concentrated in low value-added sectors) due to low educational attainment and high domestic care burden (UNDP & UNICEF 2021). A shift in gender norms



encouraged by policies and companies through family-friendly working arrangements, career breaks, and maternity and paternity leave could expand women's opportunities and decision-making beyond their caregiving roles. In doing so, women and men participating equally in the labour market boost economic growth and productivity and increase economic diversification and income equality. Achieving better employment for women and higher wages influence positively the ways households spend money in children, health and education. Thus, when more women work, economies grow.

Box 4: Lao's social insurance system

In Lao's Democratic Republic, the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) provides access to different social security benefits for informal sector workers. This is based on a voluntary basis under the 2014 Social Security Law and provides healthcare and maternity benefits. Insured persons need at least 6 months of contributions within the last 12 months. The maternity cash benefit of 80 per cent of the average reference wage (during the previous six months) is paid for a maximum of 90 days. In 2015, the number of voluntary members was 1,599 persons out of roughly 2.48 million informal sector workers in the country. This result points to the importance of compulsory social insurance that meets the needs of workers in the informal economy.

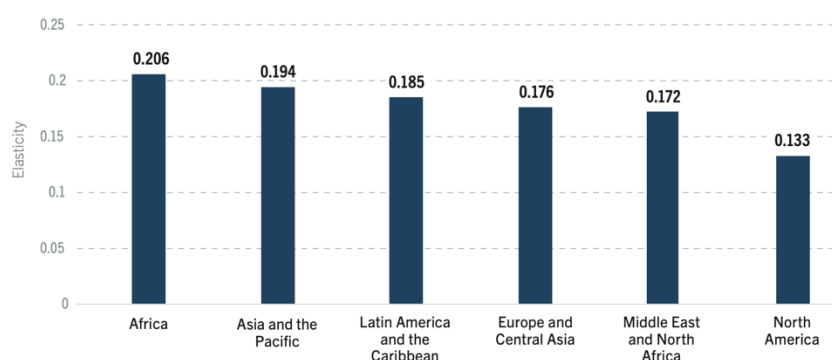
Source: [ILO \(2015\) Country Paper Lao PDR: Social Security](#)

7 Female labour participation and GDP growth

Overall, female employment and GDP growth has been linked to public long-term care expenditure. Globally, countries with a large share of GDP spent on long-term care programmes tend to have women and men older than 60 years having longer life expectancies (ILO, 2018a). In countries where women spend less hours on unpaid care work, more women are active in the labour force. I.e., a decrease in women's unpaid care and domestic work is related to an increase in women's labour force participation rate. Moreover, the higher the inequality in distribution of care responsibilities between women and men, the higher the gender gaps in labour force participation (OECD 2014). The unequal distribution of care responsibilities and the lack of care-related policies and services in some countries also explains why the reduction of gender gaps in education have not led to higher employment rates. While countries with family-friendly policies and care-related services have seen an improvement in female economic activity, countries lacking care-related policies continue to struggle with lower rates of female labour force participation.

According to ILO estimations, globally for every 1 per cent of female employment growth there is an annual GDP growth of 0.16 per cent (ILO 2019b).⁶ McKinsey Global Institute estimated that, if included in the measurement of GDP, unpaid care work carried out by women in 18 countries in Asia and the Pacific would add \$3.8 trillion⁷ to the total regional GDP or 15 per cent of the region's GDP (MGI 2018). Figure 7 shows the highest partial elasticity and the average elasticity with respect to female employment in the region.

Figure 7: Output partial elasticity with respect to female employment by region from 1991 to 2017



Source: ILO 2019b, calculations based on data from the World Bank and ILO estimates

The impact of increasing the participation of women in the labour market in Asia and the Pacific points toward a higher productive economy. However, recognizing that increasing the female employment rates does not automatically lead to a reduction of gender-based inequality is key to shifting policy recommendations. Gender inequalities in unpaid care and domestic work are correlated with lower female labour force participation, gender wage gaps and gender gaps. To boost the economic participation of women in the labour market, a targeted care economy lens must attend to specific policies to reduce the time women devote to unpaid care and domestic work. Thus, to increase the female labour force participation, a large-scale investment in the care economy is a key transformative measure needed. I.e., investing in quality paid care and care-related services as well as public services and social protection arrangements have a direct impact to a better work-family life balance and improve the working conditions for women in Asia and the Pacific.

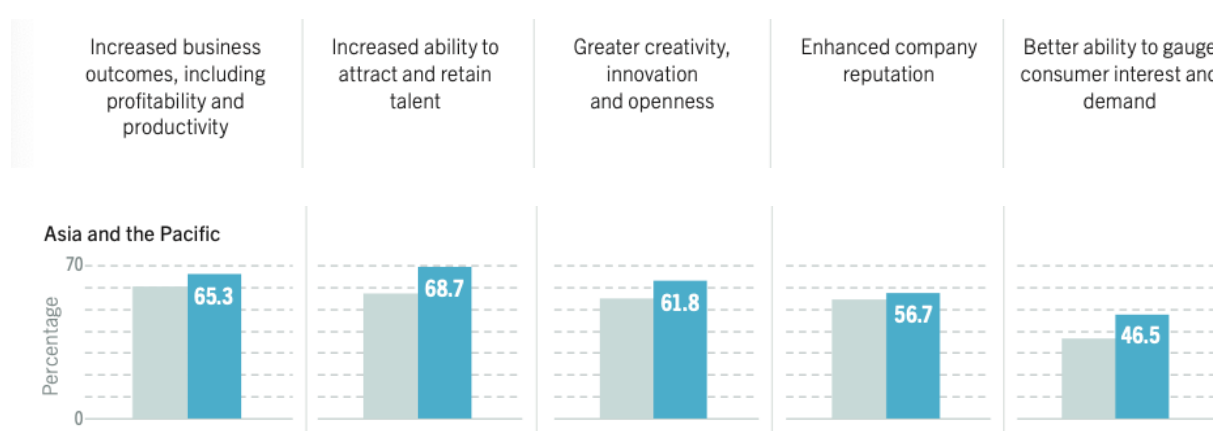
Moreover, enhancing women's economic equality and labour force participation is good for business. Companies greatly benefit from increased employment and leadership opportunities for

⁶ ILO's analysis regressed the GDP growth rate on the female employment growth rate using over 5,000 observations in a panel dataset of 186 countries. Partial output elasticity is the percentage change of output (i.e. GDP) divided by the percentage change of input (i.e. female employment) (ILO 2019b).

⁷ This is estimated from minimum wage multiplied by time spent on unpaid work. The countries are Australia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam (MGI 2018).

women, which is shown to increase organizational effectiveness and growth. It is estimated that companies with three or more women in senior management functions score higher in all dimensions of organizational performance (MGI 2018). Figure 8 shows the share of enterprises reporting improved business outcomes resulting from initiatives on gender diversity and equality in Asia and the Pacific, without considering the Central Asia subregion (ILO 2019b). These initiatives are focused on equal employment opportunity policies and valuing the diversity of backgrounds and perspectives of employees in management positions.

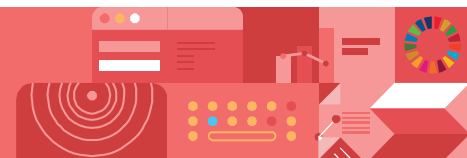
Figure 7: Improvement of business outcomes with gender initiatives by world and region in percentage



The percentage in the regions is compared to the world's percentage.

Source: ILO 2019b

Around the world, the proportion of female employees matters. According to ILO (2019b), the greater the proportion of female employees, the higher the probability that women will be in a management position. The care economy has the potential to enhance the participation of women in the labour force and boost economic growth by improving business outcomes as well as GDP. In doing so, it also tackles persisting social constructs of gender relations of men as breadwinners and women as caregivers, increases the employment in care jobs and infrastructure investments, and enhances earnings so care and domestic work can be seen as an investment in social, human, and economic growth, rather than as short welfare expenditure. Increasing the female employment rates relies on an equal distribution of care responsibilities for unpaid care and domestic work between men and women in the household as well as between the society and the State.



8 Policy recommendations

Countries in the region can promote female labour participation by focusing on the care economy in the following domains:

Ensure women's participation in the formation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and plans

Include women in the decision-making process so labour practices, minimum wages and other social protection legislations can take women's situations into account and protect their rights and needs. Monitor outcomes of the implementation of new care-related policies to ensure that rights and benefits are available to all women.

Develop more care-related policies

Due to the emphasis on care provision for children and older persons, care-disability policies are often overlooked. The preponderance of children and older persons, who require care for limited periods, possibly obscures the specific needs of persons with disabilities. Some people with a disability require care or assistance throughout their lives, and the assistance they get comes mainly from family members. To advance equal opportunities for caregivers and care-dependent persons countries need to attend to these vulnerable groups.

Promote flexible work-life balanced arrangements


The public and private sectors must collaborate to remove barriers to women's work by providing flexible work arrangements. These should not only be focused on maternal leaves but also paternal leaves, childcare cash transfers, strategies to provide childcare facilities so both parents can adopt a better work-life balance, and 'career comeback' programmes to encourage women who leave the workforce due to family responsibilities with small children to return to work.

Challenging gender bias and stereotypes in workplaces

Efforts to change gender bias and stereotypes (for example, gender roles, the motherhood penalty, and undervalue of highly feminized occupations) in workplaces can help to change negative perceptions of women's work that hinder their empowerment. This can be made through education, social media awareness, women's encouragement to participate in male-dominated domains, and emphasizing care work as fundamental for society and a prosperous economy.

Promoting labour force and time-use surveys

Labour force surveys serve to reflect the general patterns of labour participation by the population in the labour market. They are increasingly used as a source for statistics on participation in unpaid forms of work and the linkages between unpaid work and labour market performance. In addition,



time-use surveys are also an important tool to help measure unpaid work and women's time allocation and time poverty. Both can provide informed policies to improve female employment and social protection programmes. Although their promotion is important, policy action against existing gender inequalities should not be delayed due to lack of time use surveys.

Address occupational segregation

Addressing the undervalue of women's work in highly feminized occupations and industries as well as raising wages in the latter contribute to eliminating bias and reducing gender occupational segregation—for example, by attracting more men into the education and health sector. Women in many countries are often encouraged to enter male-dominated fields while men are rarely encouraged to enter traditionally female occupations. Due to the high demand for care-related jobs, promoting more male participation in these jobs will provide a more equal redistribution of paid and unpaid care work.

Support working women with children

The magnitude of the motherhood pay gap depends on the constellation of work-family laws, policies and measures, labour market institutions, gender stereotypes and societal expectations. Nonetheless, there are some general policy options which can be used by supporting care and work. For example, i) job-protected parental leave of adequate duration and with income-related pay funded by social insurance or public funds for both women and men, with specific provision for fathers, ii) high accessibility of affordable and quality child-care services and flexible working arrangements for all workers, iii) addressing the implementation gap in work-family and social policies, and iv) preventing and eliminate discrimination based on maternity and family responsibilities and creating a family-friendly workplace culture.

Promote entrepreneurial training and credit facilities

The retention of skilled women in the labour force market is often considered a challenge due to care-related responsibilities and gender norms. Relevant agencies should provide women with training on entrepreneurial skills to improve their performance in the workforce and continue their careers. Additionally, credit facilities can also help women to start their businesses.

Involve different national agencies, non-profit organizations, and stakeholders

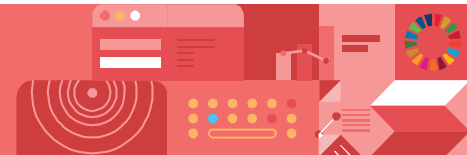
The improvement of female labour participation benefits from a holistic approach that includes governments working with relevant agencies, NGOs and stakeholders. The development of the linkage between the care economy and female labour participation needs a whole-of-society plan to encourage representatives from all segments of society to work together.



9 Conclusions

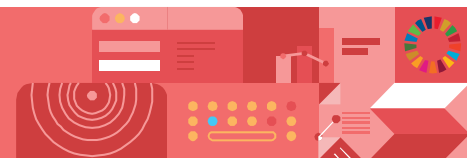
Despite the increment of opportunities for women to participate in the labour market in Asia and the Pacific, the lack of adequate care-related protection is largely based on the assumption that family members, mainly women and girls, will provide care services for free. In doing so, by reinforcing care work as women's primary responsibility, women are forced to reduce their participation in the paid workforce or adapt their paid work to unpaid care work. By distinguishing the care economy as crucial to promoting women's labour participation, it extends beyond unpaid care work. It also comprises the imperative to formalize and promote quality paid care work in critical sectors such as healthcare, education, and domestic work. This is crucially important in contexts where there is a growing informal market for care, where female migrant workers work in precarious conditions, and where legislations, labour and social protections do not include their work as equally valuable.

Inequalities in unpaid care work and inequalities in the labour force are deeply interrelated. No substantive progress can be made in achieving gender equality in the labour force before inequalities in unpaid care work are first tackled through effective policies and measures that recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work between women and men as well as between families and the state, reward paid care work, and guarantee care workers representation through social dialogue and collective bargaining. Addressing and valuing unpaid care and domestic care work is key to unlocking the potential of women and girls.




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