A. Gender Situations and Key Challenges

1. Timor-Leste continues to make progress towards gender equality and women’s empowerment. Targets for two of the Millennium Development Goal indicators related to gender equality were achieved: girls’ enrollment now equals or exceeds boys’ in pre-secondary and secondary education, and women’s share of seats in the Parliament (38.5%) is the highest in Asia and the Pacific. However, significant challenges remain, including high fertility (5.7 children per woman), high maternal mortality (557 deaths per 100,000 live births), and a low rate of women’s employment (10.4%) (footnote 1). Following the tradition of patriarchal families, women’s primary role continues to be defined by family and household responsibilities. Poor road infrastructure, limited access to clean water and sanitation, and a low rate of electrification in rural areas create additional burdens for women and restrict their economic opportunities.

2. Education. School enrollments increased rapidly between 2002 and 2010, with the gap between male and female enrollments rates reduce at the primary level and eliminated for pre-secondary and secondary schooling (footnote 2). In 2010, net primary enrollment rates reached 94% for girls and 92% for boys, and net enrollment rates in pre-secondary school were 34% for girls and 27% for boys. However, secondary school enrollment rates were still low at 21% for girls and 17% for boys (footnote 3). Despite increased enrollments, high rates of repetition and dropout remain serious issues, with more than one-quarter of first graders repeating the year and nearly 5% of students in grades 1–4 dropping out each year (footnote 1). These problems are more common among boys than girls. Sexual harassment and violence in school also remains an issue. A national zero tolerance policy exists but is yet to be effectively implemented. While teen pregnancy is relatively high, significant barriers exist for young mothers to return to school after pregnancy.

3. Among adults, educational disadvantages continue to limit women’s productive capacities and economic potential. In 2010 more than half (58%) of women aged 25 and above had never been to school, compared with 43% of men in the same age group (footnote 1). Only 52% of women and 63% of men aged 15 years or older are literate (footnote 1). Significant urban–rural disparities exist: only 40% of rural women are literate compared with 80% of urban women. Given low educational attainment among adults, vocational training plays an important role for young adults to acquire specific employable skills. Women make up about 40% of trainees in post-secondary technical and vocational training, but most are concentrated in office administration, finance, hospitality, and tourism, reflecting gender segregation in employment.

4. Health. Maternal and child mortality are key issues for Timorese women and have been identified as top public health priorities by the government. Traditional social norms and limited economic opportunities encourage women to marry and begin childbearing at a relatively young age, leading to high fertility rates. The fertility rate fell from 7.8 children per woman in 2003 to 5.7 in 2009–2010, but it was still the second highest in Asia and the Pacific. High fertility, and limited access to health services, safe water, and improved sanitation facilities increase the risk

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of maternal and child mortality. Maternal mortality decreased from 660 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2003 to 557 in 2009–2010, but it remained one of the world’s highest (footnote 4). Infant and child mortality rates have been reduced since independence in 2002 but in 2009-2010 infant mortality was still 45 deaths per 1,000 live births while under-5 mortality was 64 per 1,000 live births (footnote 4). The proportion of women receiving antenatal care from a skilled health provider increased from 61% in 2003 to 86% in 2009–2010, and the proportion of women giving birth with professional assistance grew from 19% to 30% during the same period. This was still low when compared to neighboring countries (footnote 4). Access to maternal health care varies significantly between urban and rural areas, and mother’s education is an important factor affecting women’s access to care. Hunger and poor nutrition is a serious public health concern. Among women aged 15–49, 27% were malnourished in 2009-2010, giving them a greater risk of illness, obstructed labor, and death from postpartum hemorrhage. More than half of Timorese children (58%) in 2009–2010 also suffered from chronic malnutrition (footnote 4). There was no significant gender difference in children’s malnutrition, but malnutrition was more prevalent in rural children than urban children (footnote 4).

5. **Infrastructure services.** Most rural communities are isolated by the poor road infrastructure, which (i) inhibits access to and delivery of essential social services such as health and education, (ii) restricts income earning opportunities, and (iii) creates additional burdens for women in their role as household managers. Water supply and sanitation systems, especially in rural areas, are basic: in 2010, 75% of rural households had poor or no sanitation facilities and 43% relied on unimproved sources of water. Women spend a disproportionate amount of their time collecting water and providing health care for preventable diseases caused by lack of sanitation and reliable water supplies. The low rate of rural electrification creates further time constraints and increases workloads for women. In 2010, only 19% of rural households used electricity as their main source of lighting compared with 88% of urban households. Access to electricity has improved significantly since 2010 but is still lower in rural areas. Nearly all rural households and 74% of urban households use wood for cooking.

6. **Work and economic empowerment.** There are significant gender gaps in labor force participation: only 27% of women are in the labor force (or economically active) compared with 56% of men. Wage-earning jobs have tripled over the last decade, but this benefited men more than women: 31% of employed men in 2010 were in wage-earning jobs compared with only 19% of employed women. Among employed women, 50% were engaged in agriculture, 25% in wholesale and retail trades, and 12% in education, health and others. Men were engaged in a broader variety of industries than women. Women were more likely than men to be engaged in vulnerable employment, including informal sector work, which lacks stable income and benefits. Access to financial services is crucial for women’s economic empowerment. Microfinance services currently reach about 7% of women and 3% of men aged 15–64, but these services are uneven across different districts. Draft land laws have been designed to promote gender equality in land ownership but as of March 2016 they are yet to be approved by the Parliament.

7. **Gender-based violence.** Domestic violence is the most common form of gender-based violence in Timor-Leste. It had been regarded as culturally acceptable, and women’s lack of economic empowerment contributes to their vulnerability. Cases of domestic violence are typically resolved at the family level and only involve community, religious, and state authorities if solutions cannot be found within the family. In 2009, more than two-thirds of gender-based violence cases reported to the police were related to domestic violence, although many cases are unreported. Enactment of the Penal Code (2009) and the Law against Domestic Violence
(2010) were significant milestones. Under the law, domestic violence has been classified as a public crime, and survivors have access to emergency medical help, shelter, and other support services. The law also requires education on domestic violence to be included in the school curriculum. A National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence was adopted in 2012 as a multisectoral approach to addressing gender-based violence. Barriers to accessing justice by women include the limited outreach of police, the scarcity of and long distances to courts, the coexistence of customary and formal justice systems, language, and relatively low literacy levels and insufficient resources leads to long delays in the legal process.

B. Government’s Gender Policy and Strategy

8. Timor-Leste’s Constitution provides the mandate for equality across all sectors. It calls not only for equality between women and men in all areas of family, political, economic, social, and cultural life, but also for nondiscrimination on various grounds, including gender. The importance of gender equality is further emphasized in the Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan, 2011–2030, which includes the following government priorities for gender equality: (i) combating domestic violence by implementing the National Action Plan for Gender-Based Violence; (ii) implementing gender mainstreaming in government policies and programs; (iii) increasing women’s economic empowerment through education, livelihood support, and gender equality in the civil service; and (iv) raising public awareness to change behaviors and attitudes towards a more gender-equitable society.

9. The Government of Timor-Leste’s commitment to gender equality was demonstrated in its ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and its Optional Protocol on 16 April 2003. These require the government to be accountable for its actions in addressing gender issues across social, economic, and environmental sectors through regular reporting; and enable individuals or groups to submit complaints to the United Nations committee where issues with the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women are reviewed.

10. The Secretary of State for the Support and Socio-Economic Promotion of Women (SEM) is the overarching national body for promoting gender equality. The SEM is responsible for planning, executing, coordinating, and evaluating policies related to the promotion of gender equality. Its primary responsibilities are to champion gender equality in the government and advocate the inclusion of gender in the policies, programs, and budgets of government organizations and instruments. The SEM carries out the coordination and monitoring of government policies and programs, while the implementation of laws, policies, and programs is the responsibility of the relevant ministries. The SEM has established mechanisms to fulfill its mandate, such as inter-ministerial gender working groups. It is also responsible for national monitoring of gender equality and reporting on international commitments.

11. The government has made extensive efforts to institute formal laws and policies to support gender equality. Timor-Leste has the highest proportion of women parliamentarians in Asia and the Pacific. Women’s representation had been high since the first elections in 2002.

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even before a quota system was introduced in 2006. The Law on the Election of the National Parliament requires that one in every three candidates elected to Parliament is a woman. This, however, does not guarantee women’s political influence. Women’s share of decision-making roles at the highest levels of government—as ministers, vice ministers, and secretaries of state—rose from 13% in 2007 to 18% in 2012 and to 21% in 2015. Women have almost no voice at the local level; 98% of the 442 village and 2,336 hamlet chiefs are men, with little change since independence in 2002. Progress has also been slow in increasing women’s share of public sector jobs: the proportion of women in civil service positions increased from 26% to only 29% from 2001 to 2013 (footnote 1).

C. Asian Development Bank’s Gender Strategy

12. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) recognizes gender equity as an essential driver of change in achieving inclusive development, and emphasizes gender mainstreaming in all ADB operations. ADB will support the government in implementing its national and sector-specific strategies to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment. In particular, ADB will support the government’s objective of increasing gender awareness and capacity development for gender mainstreaming across government agencies, especially in the executing and implementing agencies involved in ADB-financed projects.

13. ADB’s priority assistance in infrastructure—transport, water supply and municipal services, and energy—will incorporate gender concerns into project planning and design, given the major constraint of poor infrastructure on women’s household responsibilities and their access to health services, education, and economic opportunities. Project designs will pay particular attention to differences in men and women’s needs in order to maximize the benefits of improved infrastructure. Additional attention will be given to addressing women’s concerns in specific local contexts and promoting women’s active involvement in project consultations. Hygiene and health promotion activities will be integrated into water and sanitation project designs to maximize the health benefits of these projects.

14. Substantial gender mainstreaming efforts will be made in projects to increase technical and vocational education and training opportunities for young people in Timor-Leste. Having adequate skills training that can meet increasing demand is crucial for the economic empowerment of women, as well as for national economic development. ADB’s ongoing and future projects on skills development will promote women’s participation, even in non-traditional technical training such as construction and automotive trades, through project designs that encourage training providers and employers to enroll women trainees. Gender awareness training will also be provided to government agencies, training providers, and employers to reduce gender-stereotypical attitudes and behaviors and to promote gender equality.

15. ADB-financed projects will incorporate skills development opportunities during project implementation to build the skills capacity of the local workforce and generate employment opportunities. Such opportunities will be designed to involve both women and men, encourage non-traditional work opportunities for women, and promote women’s economic empowerment.

16. To promote the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming in ADB operations, gender strategy will emphasize the preparation of quality gender action plans and the establishment of measurable performance targets, indicators, and monitoring plans during project design. The implementation of gender action plans will be regularly reviewed, and gender results will be evaluated. The collection of sex-disaggregated data will be required for establishing baseline indicators, monitoring the progress of projects, and evaluating gender benefits.