ASIA’S JOURNEY TO PROSPERITY
Policy, Market, and Technology over 50 Years
Chapter 12: Gender and Development
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1. Why gender equality is important

- **Intrinsic value.** Gender equality is a basic human right: women and men should have equal rights, resources, and voice.

  - The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognize the importance of gender equality through a stand-alone goal (SDG 5) aiming to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.”

- **Instrumental value.** Empirical studies show that gender equality supports growth, enhances productivity, and improves development outcomes.

  - Women account for half of labor force. Improvements in women’s status (education, health, labor market participation, public life) support growth and improve labor productivity.

  - Improvements in mothers’ education, health, and status within households lead to better education and health of their children and reduce intrahousehold gender bias including son preference.

  - Gender equality enhances overall economic productivity. At the firm level, evidence shows gender-diverse working environments are more productive.
2. Improvements in women’s education

- In the past half century, Asia significantly reduced gender gaps in adult literacy…

Notes: In the 1980s to 1990s, Central Asia does not include Uzbekistan. East Asia only includes the People’s Republic of China for the 1980s to 1990s. Adult literacy is the share of population that is defined as those people aged 15 years and above who have the ability to read and write, and understand a short simple statement in his or her everyday life. This definition also includes “numeracy,” the ability to make simple arithmetic calculations.

2. Improvements in women’s education (cont.)

...and in **years of schooling**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>1960</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>M-F difference</th>
<th>2010</th>
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( ) = negative, 0.0 = magnitude is less than half of unit employed, OECD = Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Note: Barro–Lee dataset version 2.2, updated June 2018, was used in preparing this table.

Three broad reasons for women’s rising schooling and improving literacy rate

Structural transformation from the agriculture to non-agriculture sectors led to the creation of many higher-paying employment opportunities in manufacturing and services for women, raising returns to female education and encouraging parents to send girls to school. Rising household incomes and falling fertility rates have also contributed.

Public policy, such as mandatory free primary education and cash or in-kind transfer (especially food) programs conditional on schooling, decreased the effective schooling costs shouldered by parents. These policies reduced the incentives for households to discriminate on school investment between boys and girls.

Reduction in discrimination against women, due to positive changes in social norms associated with modernization, and political commitments to and legislation that promotes gender equality, has also played an important role.
3. Achievements in women’s health

- Life expectancy for both women and men has significantly improved; women continue to live longer than men.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Life Expectancy at Birth (years)</th>
<th>1960</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>F-M Gap</th>
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<th>F-M Gap</th>
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<td>75.1</td>
<td>5.2</td>
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( ) = negative, OECD = Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
• Although female mortality and life expectancy improved across developing Asia, the high ratio of boys to girls at birth in some countries remains (the nature ratio being 1.05-1.06).

4. Women’s labor force and market participation

- Empirical studies suggest the relationship between the **female labor force participation rate** (FLFPR) and per capita national income follows a U-shape.

- The FLFPR is high at earlier stages of development when income is low and agriculture is important.

- It then falls somewhat as greater household income allows some women to exit the labor market and specialize in household work.

- It rises again as societies become wealthier, women become more educated and independent, social norms change, fertility rate declines, and public policies promote female employment in response to aging.

**U-Shaped Female Labor Force Participation with Economic Development in the World, 1990 and 2017**

R² = 0.2244

R² = 0.1178

GNI = gross national income, ROW = rest of the world.

4. Women’s labor force and market participation (cont.)

- Like the rest of the world, Asia’s FLFPR is much lower than that of men. Further, many developing Asian countries’ FLFPR declined in recent decades, while that of high-income Asian countries increased, consistent with the U-shaped relationship.

Notes: Working-age population includes those aged 15–64 years. Figures are based on International Labour Organization modeled estimates. East Asia excludes Japan and the Republic of Korea. Data for the Pacific include Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, and Vanuatu, with Papua New Guinea driving most of the fall in the female labor force participation rate in the Pacific.

• **M-shaped FLFPR over life cycle.** A disruption in a woman’s labor market participation and career progression around the time of marriage, childbearing, and/or child-rearing lead to a steep decline in the FLFPR in the life cycle’s middle stage, creating an M-shaped labor supply curve.

• Social norms and cultural influences that place a disproportionally large burden on childcare and domestic work on women can reinforce the M-shaped relationship.

• But modernization and public policies can make the M-shape less pronounced.

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**Female Labor Force Participation Rate over the Life Cycle by Pseudo-Cohort**

- **Taipei, China**
  - Age 15–19 in 1980
  - Age 15–19 in 1990
  - Age 15–19 in 2000
  - Age 15–19 in 2005

- **Japan**
  - Age 15–19 in 1980
  - Age 15–19 in 1990
  - Age 15–19 in 2000
  - Age 15–19 in 2005

- **Republic of Korea**
  - Age 15–19 in 1980
  - Age 15–19 in 1990
  - Age 15–19 in 2000
  - Age 15–19 in 2005

- **Singapore**
  - Age 15–19 in 1980
  - Age 15–19 in 1990
  - Age 15–19 in 2000
  - Age 15–19 in 2005

Note: Figures prior to 1990 are based on national survey data, while figures for 1990 onward are based on International Labour Organization modeled estimates.

Despite the progress, more than half of women in developing Asia remain in **vulnerable jobs** such as street vendors, higher than the world average.

Notes: East Asia excludes the Republic of Korea. Workers in vulnerable employment include own-account workers (self-employed persons without engaging employees) and contributing family workers (self-employed persons working in an establishment operated by a relative of the same household).

4. Women’s labor force and market participation (cont.)

- Even when women find opportunities for non-vulnerable employment, they earn less than men for doing comparable work.

- In developing Asia, women earned, on average, about 75% of men’s wages during 1995–2015, slightly less than the 79% global average.

- Empirical studies suggest part of the wage gaps reflects differences in educational attainment, work experience, type of employment, and occupation or industry type between men and women; but gender bias remains.

Enterprises owned or managed by women are often characterized as small firms with a low capital base and low productivity, and often try to survive. In 2011, more than 90% of female-owned micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises in Asia were in the informal sector. These female-owned firms are constrained by access to finance and other disadvantages associated with the informal sector.

Microcredit and microfinance programs supported by nongovernment organizations, governments, and multilateral development banks have made important inroads in improving women’s financial inclusion and access to finance. Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, founded by Nobel laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus, was an early example of closing gender gaps in financial inclusion through the rapid expansion of microcredit programs in rural areas. These programs enabled women to work on income-generating, market-based activities and enhanced their bargaining power within households.

Emerging evidence indicates that the rapid digitalization of trade and growth of e-commerce offers opportunities for women entrepreneurs. Applying a gender lens to ICT initiatives can promote women’s entrepreneurship, allowing them to take advantage of online networking and outsourcing opportunities even in geographically challenged economies of the Pacific.

4. Women’s labor force and market participation (cont.)

- There are also still significant gender gaps in firm ownership and management positions in Asia, with women generally remaining underrepresented.
5. Women’s status in the household and in public life

- Traditionally, a woman’s status within the household has been defined by their reproductive and family roles (such as caring for family members, cooking, cleaning, and fetching water and firewood).

- Women across the region and around the world spend at least two times more time than men on unpaid care work. It is estimated that women in the region work the longest hours in the world when their paid and unpaid work is combined (ILO 2019).

![Chart showing Women's Time Spent on Unpaid Care and Domestic Work, 2010-2017](chart)

Lao PDR = Lao People’s Democratic Republic, OECD = Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Note: Data are based on national time use surveys, covering yearly range of 2010–2017.

Improvements in women’s education and labor market status has had some positive impact on their inter-household decision-making power.

AFG = Afghanistan, ARM = Armenia, AZE = Azerbaijan, BAN = Bangladesh, CAM = Cambodia, IND = India, INO = Indonesia, KGZ = Kyrgyz Republic, MLD = Maldives, MYA = Myanmar, NEP = Nepal, PAK = Pakistan, PHI = Philippines, TAJ = Tajikistan, TIM = Timor-Leste, TKM = Turkmenistan.

By 1970, just seven countries in the region had yet to grant women the right to vote or run for office. Today, all countries in the region have female suffrage.

There has been an increase in the percentage of women as members of Parliament (MPs) but the region is below the world average.

6. Asia’s remaining challenges in reducing gender gaps

- Significant gender gaps remain in the labor market, access to economic resources, and broader social and public life. Some of the policy priorities are:

  Continued efforts to reduce gender gaps in education and health, especially in areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), technical and vocational education and training (TVET), tertiary education, and access to reproductive health.

  Greater support for women’s labor market participation. Governments and the private sector can work together to promote affordable childcare services and family-friendly work practices, and eliminate gender-based discrimination in recruitment, promotion, and pay.

  More investment to increase women’s access to finance and other resources and training in business management skills, to nurture female entrepreneurship and corporate leadership.

  Continued legal and regulatory reforms and public awareness campaigns to promote changes in social norms to eliminate gender discrimination including violence against women and gender gaps in social, economic, and overall political rights, as enshrined in SDG 5 targets.

  In some parts of Asia, responding to new gender challenges arising from rapid aging by developing affordable, adequate, and sustainable pension, health insurance, and elderly care systems for both women and men, to alleviate the unpaid care burden that is shouldered predominantly by women.
Gender equality is an unfinished agenda, and remaining gender gaps must continue to narrow. There are several ways this can be done.

01 Continued work is needed in areas such as STEM, TVET, and training in higher value-added sectors targeting women, along with improved access to reproductive health.

02 Providing basic infrastructure remains essential. Electricity, transport, safe drinking water, and sanitation all help mitigate women’s time poverty, providing greater opportunities for education and paid jobs.

03 Countries should increase support to bolster women’s labor market participation, by promoting affordable childcare services, family-friendly work practices, and reforms to eliminate gender-based discrimination in recruitment and promotion.

04 To nurture female entrepreneurship and corporate leadership, more investment is needed to increase women’s access to finance and other resources. Training in business management skills and corporate leadership is essential.

05 Legal and regulatory reforms that promote change in social norms to eliminate gender gaps in social, economic, and overall political rights must continue, as enshrined in SDG 5 targets.

06 Address new gender challenges arising from rapid aging. Governments must alleviate the burden by developing affordable, adequate, and sustainable pension, health insurance, and elderly care systems for both women and men.

07 Finally, more resources can be generated and partnerships fostered for gender equality among governments, the private sector, development agencies, and civil society organizations.
8. Questions and further readings

• Questions

01 Why does gender equality matter?
02 What were key achievements in narrowing gender gaps in Asia in the past half century? What were key drivers of the changes?
03 What are remaining gender gaps in Asia, especially in labor and other economic areas?
04 What are remaining gender gaps in Asia in household and public domains?
05 How can public policy help narrow and eliminate these gaps?
8. Questions and further readings (cont.)

- **Further readings**
• Further readings


Thank you!

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