

POWER, VOICE and RIGHTS

A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific

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Asia-Pacific has one of the world's worst gender gaps

*More women than ever are “disappearing”
Few countries have laws prohibiting violence against women
Lack of education and paid work for women is depressing economic growth*

New Delhi, 8 March 2010—While Asia and the Pacific can take pride in the region's vibrant economic transformation in recent decades, this has not translated into progress on gender equality.

Discrimination and neglect are threatening women's very survival in the Asia-Pacific region, where women suffer from some of the world's lowest rates of political representation, employment and property ownership. Their lack of participation is also depressing economic growth.

Those were some of the findings of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)-sponsored 2010 Asia-Pacific Human Development Report launched today.

“Empowering women is vital for achieving development goals overall, and for boosting economic growth and sustainable development,” said UNDP Administrator Helen Clark, in presenting the Report: *Power, Voice and Rights: A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific*, here today. “Policy needs to advance gender equality, so that women as well as men can benefit from job creation and investments in social infrastructure.”

The Report focuses on three key areas —economic power, political decision-making and legal rights—to analyse what holds women back, and how policies and attitudes can be changed to foster a climb toward gender equality. Asia, the Report asserts, is standing at a cross-road and by putting the right policies in place now, countries in the region can achieve positive change.

Discrimination is Costly

Lack of women's participation in the workforce costs the region billions of dollars every year. In countries such as India, Indonesia and Malaysia conservative estimates show that GDP would increase by up to 2-4 percent annually if women's employment rates were raised to 70 percent, closer to the rate of many developed countries.

Fewer women than men are in paid work in every country in the region, with striking contrasts between South Asia and East Asia. Nearly 70 percent of East Asian women are in paid work, well above the

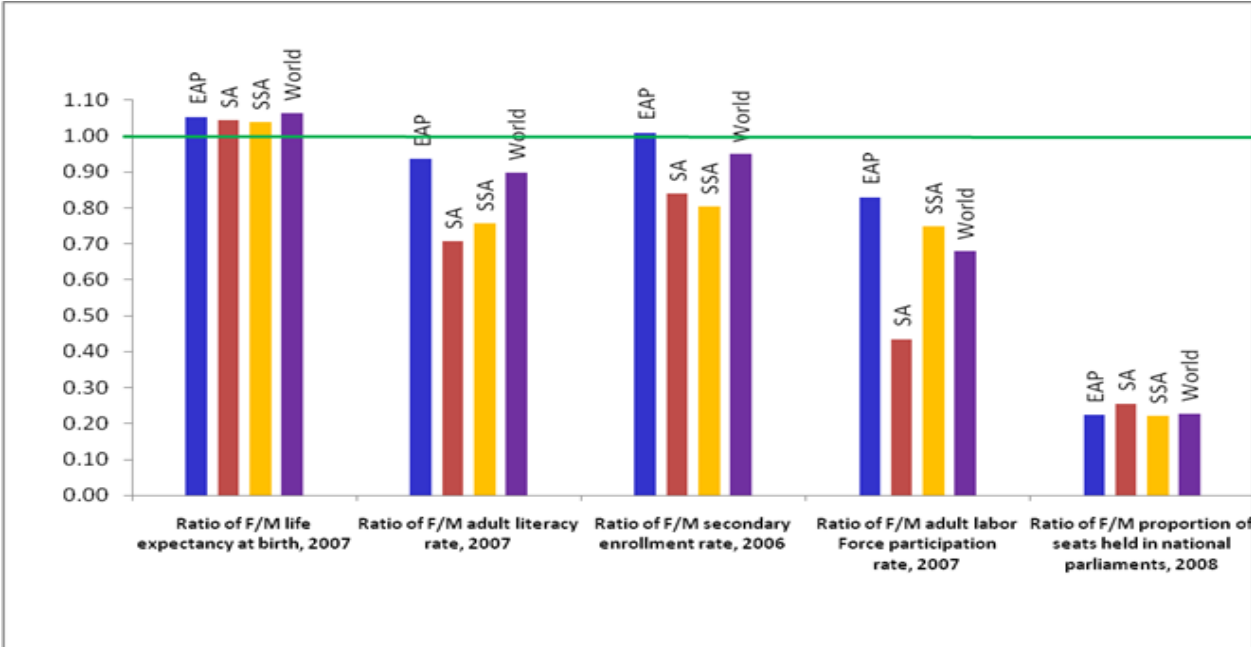
global average of 53 percent, in countries such as Cambodia, China, and Viet Nam, for example. In South Asian countries like India and Pakistan fewer than 35 percent of women do paid work. These contrasts in women’s paid work between East and South Asia co-exist in parallel with the higher long-term growth trend of the former.

Despite laws guaranteeing equal pay for equal work, women in this region still earn considerably less than men, with the pay gap ranging from 54 to 90 percent. Women “consistently end up with some of the worst, most poorly-paid jobs —often the ones that men don’t want to do, or that are assumed to be “naturally” suited to women,” the Report found.

Asia-Pacific Often Ranks Low on Gender Indicators

South Asia often comes in second worst in the world in gender equality measures, just above sub-Saharan Africa, while East Asia often fares better in health, education, and employment.

For instance, almost half the adult women in South Asia are illiterate –the world’s worst performance– while East Asian and Pacific women’s literacy rates are above the global average. South Asian women can expect to die five years earlier than their men. And more women die in childbirth there —500 for every 100,000 live births— than in any other part of the world except sub-Saharan Africa.



Few Women Hold Political Office

Asia-Pacific women hold only a handful of legislative seats, fewer than anywhere else in the world except in the Arab region. Women in Asia-Pacific rarely make it to elective office. The Pacific sub-region accounts for four of the world’s six countries without any women lawmakers.

Development level doesn’t necessarily correlate with high political participation for women, either; women in Japan and the Republic of Korea, for example, hold just 10 percent of legislative seats.

Interestingly, countries emerging from conflict appear to offer better political opportunities for women: 33 percent of Nepal's parliamentarians are women, and nearly 30 percent of Timor-Leste's.

Quotas for women-held seats in political bodies can be effective, as evidenced by progress in local governments in India. However, to sustain this level of participation, quotas must be combined with constitutional provisions, leadership training and political party reforms to bring women into the political mainstream in their own right, the Report suggested.

Disappearing Women

The problem of “missing girls” —in which more boys are born than girls, as girl fetuses are presumably aborted, and women die from health and nutrition neglect— is actually growing. Birth gender disparity is greatest in East Asia, where 119 boys are born for every 100 girls.

China and India together account more than 85 million of the nearly 100 million “missing” women estimated to have died from discriminatory treatment in health care, nutrition access or pure neglect —or because they were never born in the first place, the Report found.

A tenth of women here report being assaulted by their partners, and a majority of women who do work —up to 85 percent of South Asia's working women— are engaged in unstable low-end work in the informal economy.

Few women hold property. Although women predominate in agriculture, they head only 7 percent of farms, compared to 20 percent in most other regions of the world.

“Pervasive gender inequality remains a barrier to progress, justice and social stability, and deprives the region of a significant source of human potential,” the Report concluded.

Laws are Lagging

Laws aren't helping much. The region is far behind where it could be on basic issues, such as protecting women from violence, upholding entitlements to property —even allowing people to divorce in an informed and reasonable way.

Few countries have adopted or implemented laws prohibiting violence against women, despite widespread evidence of discrimination and assault. Nearly half of the countries in South Asia, and more than 60 percent of those in the Pacific, have no laws against domestic violence. Nor are there many provisions against sexual harassment in workplaces, though 30 to 40 percent of working women report experiencing verbal, physical or sexual abuse.

“Too often, customs or religious beliefs have become a rationale for laws and legal systems to ignore or soft-peddle or even, in the worst cases, justify issues such as discriminatory inheritance practices and the multiple forms of violence that specifically target women,” Anuradha Rajivan, leader of the multinational team that prepared the Report, said.

Many women are also prevented from accessing justice if it involves challenging their husbands, other family members or the broader status quo, the Report concluded.

Region at a Crossroad: Recommendations

Removing barriers to women's ownership of assets, such as land; expanding paid employment; making migration safe and investing in high-quality education and health are some of the main solutions recommended for addressing these problems.

The Report recommended reforming constitutions, training judicial and law enforcement personnel in gender-sensitive practices and progressively interpreting religious principles —which recognize the equal value of all human beings. Political quotas to increase women's political participation, with sanctions for non-compliance, could be necessary. More women should also be enfranchised into party politics; and relied upon as brokers of peace in times of emergency.

“Gender equality does not mean sameness, but it encompasses respect for diversity and freedoms,” said Rajivan. “Ultimately, it is about political will, led by public action. But equality cannot be delivered from the top alone —an attitudinal change in every one of us is necessary for a genuine transformation.

For more information and to access the 2010 Asia-Pacific Human Development Report and the complete press kit please visit: <http://www2.undprcc.lk/ext/pvr/>

ABOUT THE ASIA-PACIFIC HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT: *Asia-Pacific Human Development Reports have become a regular series under the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific. The Reports provide continuing analyses of critical long term development issues relevant at both the regional and country levels. The Asia- Pacific Human Development Report Series offers the region a forum for furthering dialogues and structuring debates to support a people-centered agenda.*

ABOUT THE UNDP'S REGIONAL CENTRE FOR ASIA-PACIFIC: *The UNDP's Regional Centre for Asia Pacific, Colombo Office, was established in January 2005 to serve countries of Asia-Pacific. It is a regional hub for development knowledge and expertise, providing policy advisory, capacity development and advocacy services. UNDP works in 37 countries in Asia-Pacific.*

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