Toward Gender Equality in East Asia and the Pacific

Key Findings of the Regional Study on Gender Equality and Development

Gender equality is an important development objective in its own right; it is also good for development

- Promoting gender equality in access to productive resources and economic opportunity can contribute to higher economic productivity benefitting women and men alike. If societies in East Asia and Pacific were to allocate resources on the basis of people’s skills and abilities, rather than by their gender, per worker productivity could increase by as much as 7 to 18 percent, with important implications for growth and poverty reduction.

- Promoting gender equality in access to resources, economic opportunity and voice is also an investment in the next generation. Healthier, better educated mothers have healthier, better educated children; greater female earnings and assets are also associated with greater investments in children. The effects begin before child birth and are long-lasting, contributing to improved economic prospects for the next generation.

- Promoting gender equality voice and influence in society contributes not only to more representative but higher quality development decision making. When more women participate in policymaking, decisions better reflect both women’s and men’s preference. Recent evidence shows that greater female participation in government improves provision of public goods and strengthens natural resource management at the local level.

Much of the East Asia and Pacific region has experienced significant socio-economic progress – including in gender equality – in recent decades

As a region, East Asia and the Pacific has experienced faster growth and poverty reduction than any other region. This growth and development has contributed to narrowing of gender gaps in several areas, most notably in education and health. In many ways, women in East Asian and Pacific countries are better positioned than ever before to participate in and contribute to their economies and societies.

- Gender gaps in access to education have closed dramatically – including at the secondary and tertiary levels. The region had the highest ratio of female-to-male enrollments at the primary level of all developing regions; only the Latin America and the Caribbean region performed better at the secondary level.

- The region has made significant advances in a number of health outcomes. Fertility rates have sharply declined, and under-five mortality rates have halved since 1990 for both boys and girls. Significant gains have been made in share of births attended by skilled health professionals, and the maternal mortality ratio has decreased.

- Female labor force participation is relatively high in the region; roughly 70 percent of women in East Asia and the Pacific participate in economic activities, higher than any other region.

- Women in East Asia also have higher participation in the management and ownership of firms than in other developing regions.
Despite progress, important challenges remain to achieving gender equality in the region

Growth and development alone are not sufficient to achieve gender equality in all dimensions and for all women. Gender gaps in economic opportunity and voice and influence in society have proven particularly persistent.

- **Gender gaps in access to basic education remain** in a few countries where overall enrollment rates are also relatively low; in several countries, gaps persist among specific sub-groups (e.g., ethnic minorities).

- **Maternal mortality remains high** in lower-income and several Pacific countries. And in East Asia over a million girls are never born due to strong son preference.

- **Women still earn less than men for similar work** – around 70 to 80 percent, on average; female workers are more likely than men to work as unpaid family labor or in the informal sector. Whether as farmers or entrepreneurs, women still own less land and have weaker access to productive inputs, adversely affecting firm productivity and profitability.

- **Women continue to have weaker voice and influence than men in the home, in politics, and in civil society.** Women are significantly underrepresented in politics and policymaking in the region. And violence against women – an extreme manifestation of powerlessness – remains high. Women’s lack of voice and influence is particularly acute in the Pacific, where the share of female parliamentarians is among the lowest and the prevalence of gender-based violence is among the highest of any developing region.

**East Asian and Pacific countries are at the forefront of several global trends that will have significant impacts on gender equality.** Much of the region is characterized by rising economic integration, rapid adoption of new information and communication technology (ICTs), domestic and international migration, rapid urbanization, and population aging. While not commonly recognized by policymakers, these phenomena have important gender dimensions that are generating both new opportunities for and new risks to gender equality.

**There is an important role for public action to ensure continued progress towards gender equality in the region.** The report identifies four priority areas where public policy can contribute to greater gender equality and more effective development in East Asia and the Pacific.

- **Promoting gender equality in endowments and human development.** This remains a priority where gender gaps in education remain large and/or health outcomes are poor; closing gaps in human development, where they persist, is likely to yield high returns.

- **Taking measures to close gender gaps in economic opportunity.** Active measures are often warranted on both equity and efficiency grounds. Which policy levers will yield the highest returns depends on the structure of the country’s economy and which specific constraints are most binding.

- **Taking initiatives to strengthen women’s voice and influence** – and to protect them from violence – is also called for across the region. Such measures will contribute to the quality of development decision making and, thus, to development more broadly.

- **Fostering opportunities and managing risks** associated with emerging regional trends.