THE ROLES OF WOMEN

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Introduction

Lives and experiences of women in the Asia Pacific widely vary depending on the region and the nature of historical-social-economic-cultural settings they are situated in. It is a challenging pursuit to offer an overview of various trends in health, education, labor market, political and social status, and legal reforms for women in the Asia Pacific. Countries that fall under the broad definition of "Asia Pacific" have significant overlaps with as well as differences from each other, making gendered experiences in the region complex and diverse. Nevertheless, this chapter attempts to offer a sketch and analysis of various indicators, trends, reforms, achievements, and challenges that women in the Asia Pacific experienced in the last few decades.

The contemporary globalizing trends around the world have transformed the way women are integrated into the world market in the Asia Pacific region. Market-oriented economic reforms, widespread privatization of state-owned enterprises, and the 1997-98 East Asian Financial crisis and the 2008 global financial crisis have affected the experiences of women in different ways. In some countries, these changes, on the one hand, created jobs and labor market participation opportunities for women and challenged sexist socio-cultural structures. On the other hand, they also disproportionately pushed working-class women into labor-intensive and low-paid working

conditions, exploited their cheapened labor, and sustained systems of oppression. Therefore, the impact of these changes and reforms are not linear. Within the same country, they often benefitted some women while marginalized others. We see these variations across class, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, religion, formal vs. informal jobs, and rural vs. urban locations of women. This chapter is an attempt to capture a comprehensive overview of the varied experiences of women in the Asia Pacific and offer a deeper, critical analysis of various factors shaping these experiences.

We begin the chapter with a broad outline of how various structural shifts ensuing from globalization resulted or did not result in gender discrimination in the Asia Pacific. We then extend the analysis to go into more detail and explore how economic and structural changes translated into changes in health, education, labor market, political and socio-economic outcomes, and legal reforms for women in relation to men. Our analysis reveals whether progress has occurred (or not occurred) in terms of indicators and how the "progress," or the absence thereof, resulted in varied outcomes for different groups of women.

- **The Impact of Globalization**

With rapid economic growth for most of the Asia Pacific economies since the 1960s have come equally rapid changes in the economic environment that women face in their daily lives. In the Asia-Pacific's higher-income economies, industry and export mixes first focused on lower-skill, labor-intensive products— such as textiles, garments, and shoes—and in more recent decades have shifted toward higher-skill, technology-intensive products. These structural shifts in economies such as in Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea have led to substantial challenges for female workers. In these economies, women tended to be clustered in industries that started to shed their workforce, upgrade, and even move abroad to lower-wage countries such as China

and Indonesia. Women in these lower-wage countries, in turn, have felt the impact of globalization as their employers faced severe pressures on international markets to keep costs low.

Two schools of thought are emerging to explain why increased integration in the world economy may have differential effects for women and men, particularly in the labor market. The forces of globalization are expected to create increasing pressures on employers to undergo cost-cutting practices, particularly if sex discrimination plays a role in employers' hiring and wage decisions. According to the dynamic implications of Becker's (1959) neoclassical theory of discrimination, if discrimination is costly, then increased competition from foreign investors and international trade will reduce the ability of employers to discriminate against women. Hence according to the neoclassical school of thought, over time, competition from international forces is not compatible with persistent discrimination against women, and any gender wage gap due to discrimination should fall. In contrast, non-neoclassical approaches to discrimination argue that rather than being an abnormality that occurs when market conditions are imperfectly competitive, discrimination is entirely consistent with the labor market outcomes of competitive firms and groups of workers acting in economically rational ways. In other words, wage discrimination can persist in the face of growing competition from abroad if women work in an environment of employment segregation and if they have little ability to negotiate for wage gains in bargaining situations.

The jury is still out on which school of thought is better supported by the empirical record for the Asia Pacific. Several studies that include East Asian economies among a larger group of industrialized and developing countries have found some evidence supporting the neoclassical theory. That is, increased competitive pressure due to openness to international trade is

associated with higher relative wages for female workers (Behrman and King 1999; Oostendorp 2004). However, those macro-level studies do not always focus on micro-level mechanisms of social, economic, and cultural forces of globalization shaping the gender pay gap (Anderson 2005; Oostendorp 2009). Several case studies focusing on individual East Asian economies have found that greater integration in the world economy has proven less beneficial for women. For example, in Taiwan, the male-female wage gap, even after controlling for gender differences in worker skills and domestic market structures, appears to have actually grown in industries that became relatively more open to international trade (Berik, Rodgers, and Zveglich 2004). The Multifiber Arrangement (MFA), which imposed quotas on the amount of clothing and textile exports from developing countries to developed countries, created large positive wage premiums and narrowed down the gender wage gap in Cambodia. With the expiration of the MFA in 2005, the wage premiums decreased and the gender wage gap widened in the country (Robertson *et al.* 2018). In an effort to support competitiveness in export industries based on low-cost labor, some Asia Pacific governments suppressed collective bargaining in export industries such as textiles, garments, and footwear (Caraway 2009; Human Rights Watch 2009). Because women workers are concentrated in these industries, these controls on worker organization have disproportionately affected women's bargaining efforts. Hence gender discrimination in East Asian economies may have persisted in the face of, or even due to, international competition.

Not only have global changes in recent decades involved dramatic growth in the international trade of goods and services, but physical capital has also increasingly flowed across borders in the form of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). The Asian financial crisis in 1997 slowed down the amount of FDI to ASEAN countries. These countries started to attract FDI at an accelerated rate starting from 2003. Singapore and Thailand attracted the highest amount of

FDI (Diaconu 2014: 906). Although a general decline occurred in global FDI flows to developing economies, FDI flows into ASEAN still remained high at $96.7 billion (ASEAN and UNCTD 2017). These international capital flows have involved consequences for workers in both the sending and recipient economies, the extent to which are still disputed in the literature. One such consequence that appears to have had particularly large effects on female workers in the Asia Pacific is the subcontracting by final-goods producers—both foreign and domestically owned—toward smaller-scale, sometimes home-based operations. These smaller-scale operations are appealing to larger firms for their low labor costs: workers, predominantly female, are paid lower wages and typically remain uncovered by costly labor regulations that stipulate certain benefits and the right to organize. In addition to low pay, which is often piece-rate, and no benefits, working hours are long and shop conditions, such as lighting and ventilation, are often poor. These jobs tend to be filled by women who are displaced from the formal sector, or by new labor-market entrants who need to work while caring for their children at the same time (Balakrishnan 2002; Hawkesworth 2018).

Hand in hand with greater integration in global markets have come broad economic reform strategies in a number of Asia Pacific economies. The privatization of public services and public enterprises, widespread since the 1980s, constitutes an integral part of these broad strategies. Privatization is motivated by the need to trim government budget deficits, correct staffing and skill imbalances in public enterprises, improve the efficiency of public sector operations, and refocus the priorities of national governments. Privatization will hurt workers in the short term as they experience layoffs and earnings losses, particularly when governments are unable to support displaced workers with adequate compensation packages, and public-sector downsizing is likely to affect women differently than men. Downsizing often involves layoffs

for those workers with lower levels of tenure, education, and other qualifications. Hence women are disproportionately affected by downsizing if, on average, they are less qualified than men.

Once they have lost their public-sector jobs, women may face relatively larger obstacles in finding comparable formal-sector jobs, forcing them to turn to low-pay and informal sector work or to detach from the labor market altogether. Such obstacles include employer preferences to hire temporary and part-time workers in order to avoid labor market regulations that raise the cost of hiring female workers (such as maternity leave policies), as well as outright sex-based discrimination in employment. Although some female employment in the informal sector is temporary as countries undergo an adjustment, women with low levels of education and skills may be displaced to the informal sector for a longer period (Hawkesworth 2006). Hence privatization has become an important force behind the persistently large informal sectors in many Asia Pacific economies.

Since the 1980s, two Asian countries have experienced particularly large economic and political transitions away from state control toward greater market orientation: Vietnam and China. Vietnam's massive transition from a centrally-planned economy to a more market-based economy involved the shift of about one-third of its public-enterprise workforce (over 2.4 million workers) into the private sector, mostly into agricultural and urban informal jobs. A closer look at Vietnam's labor force data suggests that public-sector job displacement in the 1990s had been relatively more tumultuous for female workers. Employment statistics published in Rama (2002) indicate that a disproportionate share of women shifted from public sector work into unpaid work, or they left the labor market altogether (Rama 2002: 175). The number of government-owned firms in Vietnam declined from 10,000 in the 1980s to 1000 by 2015. The government has just completed a $7 billion divestment campaign which will equitize 127 firms

between 2017 and 2020 (Jennings 2018). In 2018, Vietnam became the seventh country to pass the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which obligates the country to further privatize the state sector (Vu 2018). Vietnam's integration in CPTPP is likely to make the minimum wage job market more competitive and incentivize employers to further retract benefits and exploit women workers (NOW 2015).

In China, the movement away from a centrally-planned economy towards greater emphasis on market forces included substantial labor market reforms in which wage determination shifted from a centralized administrative process to a more decentralized market-oriented system, and wages were linked more closely to worker productivity. The "*xia gang*" initiative in 1997 allowed employers to get rid of their responsibility of providing in-kind benefits, such as housing, medical, and pensions, to workers. Those labor market reforms had a disproportionate impact on women workers. Jenq (2015) argues that the industry-level privatization resulted in a 30-50 percent increase in the gender gap in urban employment. Men are disproportionately employed in many state-owned industries, and lack of childcare and education benefits restrict female labor supply (Jenq 2015). Increased labor-market flexibility, combined with sustained economic growth of 8-9 percent per year well into the 2000s, contributed to a surge in non-agricultural job opportunities, especially in labor-intensive industries such as clothing and textiles. The evidence on whether these labor market reforms affected women and men differently is mixed (World Bank 2001; Meng 1996). One set of studies found that women living in urban areas experienced disproportionate job losses from the public sector; men were more likely in the early years to gain access to new non-farm jobs while women stayed behind on the farm; and less government involvement in the private sector translated into the weakening of anti-discrimination laws and a resurgence of traditional attitudes

toward the unequal roles of female and male workers. In contrast, another group of studies found that women have made more recent gains in access to new non-farm employment opportunities in rural areas; in absolute terms, women's private-sector wages are higher than women's state-enterprise wages; and the overall gender wage gap has not changed much. Conclusions on changes in the wage gap can differ depending on the years and the sector of economic activity. For example, in the early years of reform (1981-1987), the overall gender wage gap in the state-enterprise sector did not change much (Kidd and Meng 2001), while during the late 1980s to mid-1990s the gender wage gap in the rural sector grew (Rozelle *et al.* 2002). In 2011, the gender wage gap was still larger in rural areas than in urban areas (Gu 2017). Privatization benefited women who are employed in high technology industries and enjoyed higher relative wages. However, it lowered the productivity ratio and wages of women who are engaged in labor-intensive manufacturing (Dammert and Marchand 2015).

Strong economic growth records, increased participation in international goods markets, and market-oriented reforms were accompanied by rapid and widespread financial sector liberalization during most of the 1990s. The 1997-1998 financial crisis put a quick halt to the Asia Pacific's strong economic progress, with particularly large economic and social costs in Thailand, Indonesia, and South Korea. Although careful studies on the full social impact of the financial crisis are still limited, it is clear that effects did differ across gender, but not always to the disadvantage of women (Lim 2000; Aslanbeigui and Summerfield 2000; Manning and van Dierman 2000). The largest effects in the short-term occurred in the region's labor markets. For example, men's employment losses in Thailand were generally larger than those of women, while wage cuts for women and men were comparable. In Indonesia and the Philippines, more women were entering into paid work, and a higher proportion of women were working long

weeks to help households cope financially during the crisis. In Korea, both women and men experienced large declines in regular jobs, but women saw a sizeable increase in job openings for less secure positions as daily workers. The 2008 global financial crisis was much broader and more complex than the 1997-1998 Asian Financial crisis. It affected the Asia Pacific when import demands from advanced economies drastically fell and export orders were canceled, resulting in massive layoffs in the region. South Korea experienced a 32.8 percent drop in export in 2008. Japan and Taiwan experienced a 35 percent and a 41.9 percent drop respectively in 2009 (Heyzer 2011). Since women made up the majority of export manufacturing workforce in the Asia Pacific, they were disproportionately affected by the global financial crisis. In Thailand, women previously employed in the manufacturing sector lost jobs and turned to the informal economy where wages were lower, irregular, and insecure (Oxfam GB 2010). Studies have shown that women in the informal sector faced a rise in work hours, decrease in wages, an increase in physical and psychological burden during and after the crisis (Dullnig *et. al*. 2010).

Economic development and increasing integration in world markets are not the only broad forces to have affected women's lives in the Asia Pacific. Social norms, customs, and religious views of women form an ever-present backdrop to the way women engage their daily lives. Gender related customs and beliefs often prescribe the types of work and activities that are considered appropriate for men and women, and they create strong incentives for people to behave in accepted ways as members of the family, community, and workforce. Not surprising given its vast geographical size, gender customs vary considerably across the Asia Pacific region. This variation comes with differences across and within countries in social classes, ethnic groups, and religions. For example, young Indonesian and Malaysian Muslim women are more religiously observant, yet much more cosmopolitan, progressive, and career-driven than the

previous generation of Muslim women in those countries (Anis 2017). In China, market liberalization is combined with Confucian values. Confucian morality maintains the state order, which eventually protects free market interests and shapes women's choices and opportunities. Some aspects of Confucianism have oppressed women whereas other aspects focused on a communal feminist understanding of the well-being of women and all human beings (Blanchard and Warnecke 2010).

The Asia Pacific stands out among developing regions for its sustained economic growth in recent decades, as outlined in Chapter 5. As most economies in the region have prospered, they have become increasingly integrated into the world's goods and financial markets, they have undergone major structural reforms, and they have made varying steps toward greater market-orientation. These shifts in the macroeconomic environment are associated with considerable changes in the lives of women and men, within and outside of the labor market. The next five sections show how economic growth and structural change have translated into improvements in health, education, labor market, political and social outcomes, and legal reforms for women and men—in absolute and relative terms.

- **Health**

Health status is one of the most important determinants of how people feel, care for their children and family members, engage in their communities, and achieve economic satisfaction. For example, poor health can reduce an individual's productive capacity and wage returns in the labor market, which could then have economic repercussions for the entire family in terms of poverty and debt. Numerous indicators are appropriate for measuring the health status of individuals, ranging from more subjective self-reports of well-being to more objective measures

such as life expectancy, mortality (deaths), and morbidity (sickness). Access to health care facilities and fiscal expenditures on health care are also considered in discussions of health status. Across developing countries, data on mortality tend to be much more reliable and accessible as a source of health status information compared to data on morbidity. Most deaths are formally registered, and the information is compiled and disseminated by national ministries of health. Because the mortality data usually include information on age and sex, indicators related to life expectancy and mortality are useful for assessing gender differences in health status.

Table 11.1 Life Expectancy By Gender

	Life expectancy at birth, female (years)				Life expectancy at birth, male (years)			
	1980	1990	2000	2016	1980	1990	2000	2016
Brunei Darussalam	71.9	74.6	76.9	78.9	68.9	71.5	73.7	75.6
Cambodia	30.5	55.9	60.6	70.9	25.1	51.2	56.2	66.8
Indonesia	60.8	64.7	68.0	71.4	58.5	61.9	64.6	67.2
Laos	50.3	54.9	60.3	68.2	47.8	52.3	57.5	65.1
Malaysia	69.6	72.6	75.0	77.7	66.6	68.9	70.8	73.2
Myanmar	57.4	61.0	64.2	68.9	52.6	56.5	60.1	64.2
Philippines	64.6	68.0	70.3	72.7	59.9	62.6	64.2	65.8
Singapore	74.7	77.6	80.0	85.1	69.8	73.1	76.0	80.6
Thailand	67.5	73.4	74.5	79.1	61.5	67.2	66.9	71.6
Vietnam	72.0	75.1	78.1	80.9	63.1	66.0	68.4	71.5
China	68.3	71.0	73.7	77.8	65.4	67.7	70.4	74.8
Hong Kong	77.9	80.3	83.9	87.3	71.6	74.6	78.0	81.3
North Korea	69.0	72.9	69.0	75.1	62.7	66.0	61.2	68.1
South Korea	70.4	75.9	79.7	85.2	61.9	67.5	72.3	79.0
Japan	78.8	81.9	84.6	87.1	73.6	75.9	77.7	81.0

“World Bank Open Data | Data.” Accessed 25 February 2019. https://data.worldbank.org/.

As shown in Table 11.1 – which reports life expectancies at birth by gender in 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2016 – life expectancy has risen for women and men in all the Asia Pacific economies. This gain in life expectancies is consistent with gains seen in the world's other developing regions. In all countries, women have an advantage in life expectancy over men, reflecting evidence that females have a biological advantage in survival over males. However, the female advantage is not uniform across countries. In 2016, women's advantage in life expectancy in higher-income economies, such as Japan, Hong Kong, and South Korea, ranged between 6 to 7 years. In contrast, the female advantage stood below four years in Brunei, Laos, and China in 2016.

The smaller female advantage is driven by a combination of cultural and economic conditions that favor males and create discriminatory treatment toward young girls and women in access to health care and nutrition. These conditions cause women to experience lower longevity than would be expected in the absence of the discriminatory treatment (Coale 1991: 519; Sen 1989: 14; Hummer and Hernandez 2013: 6). Just as women's life expectancy relative to men's varies across countries, changes over time in the female advantage also differ across countries. In many countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, the female advantage has grown over time. Possible explanations for this increase are improvements in women's diets and medical care relative to those of men, better medical treatment for infectious diseases that had a relatively larger impact on women, changes in occupational roles that have actually increased occupational health risks for men, and shifts away from agricultural sector work (Schultz 1993; Mellor and Rodgers 2001; Brannon 2016, 390-391). The relative importance of these alternative explanations is not known, and they do not explain the stagnation

or even the slight decline in the female advantage over time for several economies, including Brunei, Cambodia, Myanmar, and China.

Table 11.2 Under-5 Mortality Rate By Gender

	Mortality rate, under-5, male (per 1,000 live births)				Mortality rate, under-5, female (per 1,000 live births)			
	1990	2000	2010	2017	1990	2000	2010	2017
Brunei Darussalam	14.5	12.7	11.5	11.3	12.2	10.8	9.7	9.6
Cambodia	123.7	114.3	49.0	32.5	107.7	99.2	39.6	25.7
Indonesia	90.3	56.7	36.8	28.3	77.3	47.2	29.5	22.3
Laos	162.9	120.3	86.8	68.9	145.0	104.4	73.7	57.7
Malaysia	18.3	11.2	8.4	8.5	14.8	9.1	6.9	7.2
Myanmar	123.0	96.1	69.2	53.0	107.9	83.2	58.6	44.0
Philippines	62.9	42.8	34.8	31.2	52.0	34.5	27.7	24.8
Singapore	8.3	4.2	3.0	3.1	7.0	3.5	2.6	2.6
Thailand	40.6	24.3	14.7	10.5	33.0	19.3	11.8	8.5
Vietnam	59.0	34.5	26.6	24.2	43.7	24.7	19.0	17.3
China	56.0	38.7	16.8	9.9	51.5	34.7	14.6	8.7
Japan	6.9	4.9	3.4	2.7	5.7	4.1	3.0	2.4
South Korea	16.8	8.0	4.4	3.5	14.1	6.9	3.8	3.0
North Korea	48.1	65.4	33.1	21.3	40.0	55.8	26.9	17.2

"World Bank Open Data | Data." Accessed 25 February 2019. https://data.worldbank.org/.

Some of the lower income Asia Pacific economies have demonstrated significant improvement in the infant and child mortality rate. As shown in Table 11.2, in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, more than 83 young children out of every 1000 live births did not reach the age of 5 in 2000. In 2017, the under-5 mortality rate for every 1000 female children dropped from 99.2 in 2000 to 25.7 in 2017 in Cambodia, 104.4 in 2000 to 57.7 in 2017 in Laos, and 83.2 in 2000 to 44 in 2017 in Myanmar. Infant and child mortality rates fall sharply as income rises, with under-5 mortality rates almost between 2 and 3 in 2017 in rich economies such as Japan and Singapore. Globally, during infancy, female mortality rates are lower than those of males, mostly due to genetic differences in health at the time of birth. China used to have higher female mortality than males for children aged one to four (Waldron 1987: 194; Hill and Upchurch 1995: 128). This excess female mortality was associated with a relative lack of caloric intake, nutritional content, immunization, and medical treatment that adversely affected young girls, as well as patterns of son preference by parents. However, the country achieved significant progress in maternal education and gender-sensitive public policies and an economic boom, which resulted in a sharp decrease in child mortality over recent years. It achieved a reduction of under-5 mortality faster than 8.8 percent (twice the pace of Millennium Development Goal 4: Reduce child mortality) (Wang *et al*. 2016). Under-5 mortality for female children and male children in China was 8.7 and 9.9 respectively in 2017.

Table 11.3 Indicators of Women's Reproductive Health in Asia Pacific, Various Years

	Fertility rate, total (births per woman)			Maternal mortality ratio (modeled estimate, per 100,000 live births)			Prevalence of anemia among pregnant women (%)			Births attended by skilled health staff (% of total)		
	1990	2000	2015	1990	2000	2015	1990	2000	2015	1990	2000	2015
Brunei Darussalam	3.3	2.2	1.9	35.0	31.0	23.0	31.4	25.3	26.6	..	99.2	100.0
Cambodia	5.6	3.8	2.6	1,020.0	484.0	161.0	58.2	57.4	55.4	..	31.8	..
Indonesia	3.1	2.5	2.4	446.0	265.0	126.0	45.4	38.1	40.5	40.7	66.9	..
Laos	6.2	4.3	2.8	905.0	546.0	197.0	51.2	46.4	45.0	..	16.7	..
Malaysia	3.6	2.8	2.1	79.0	58.0	40.0	43.2	36.2	36.2	92.8	96.6	99.4
Myanmar	3.5	2.9	2.2	453.0	308.0	178.0	49.2	45.4	52.5	..	..	..
Philippines	4.3	3.8	3.0	152.0	124.0	114.0	45.7	46.5	30.8	..	58.0	..
Singapore	1.8	1.6	1.2	12.0	18.0	10.0	37.7	32.0	31.5	..	99.7	99.6
Thailand	2.1	1.7	1.5	40.0	25.0	20.0	30.4	29.2	39.0	..	99.3	..
Vietnam	3.6	2.0	2.0	139.0	81.0	54.0	47.4	37.1	36.3	..	58.8	..
China	2.4	1.5	1.6	97.0	58.0	27.0	30.8	23.8	31.1	94.0	96.6	99.9
Japan	1.5	1.4	1.5	14.0	10.0	5.0	38.2	37.7	34.1	99.9	99.8	99.9
South Korea	1.6	1.5	1.2	21.0	16.0	11.0	35.7	25.8	25.4	98.0	99.9	100.0
Nortk Korea	2.3	2.0	1.9	75.0	128.0	82.0	39.5	35.5	37.3	..	96.7	..

"World Bank Open Data | Data." Accessed 25 February 2019. https://data.worldbank.org/.

There is a well-documented relationship across developing regions and over time between total fertility rates and per capita income. Fertility rates were highest in the Asia Pacific's lower income countries and lowest in the richest economies. However, advances in the reproductive health of women in recent decades have made significant contributions to the improvement in women's overall well-being across the Asia Pacific. Several indicators depict these changes in reproductive health, including a substantial reduction in fertility rates across countries, declines in maternal mortality, increased availability of family planning programs and contraceptive devices, and greater access to skilled health staff during childbirth. The fertility rate decreased from 5.6 births per woman in 1990 to 2.6 births per woman in 2015 in Cambodia. Laos was able to reduce its fertility rate from 6.2 in 1990 to 2.1 in 2015. These large declines in fertility rates are due in large part to rising incomes, greater female educational attainment, and also to strong commitments by the governments to provide family planning services and make contraception options more easily available. Numerous higher income countries, such as Singapore, Japan, and South Korea continue to have recorded fertility rates below 2, too low for the population to replace itself (given infant and child mortality, a fertility rate of about 2.1 required for a population to replace itself). These countries are increasingly becoming reliant on immigrant workers to sustain the much-needed workforce.

Because its fertility rate was already fairly low in 1990, the decline in China's fertility rate is less pronounced, but in terms of sheer magnitude of the number of people affected, China's family planning program is one of the largest scale efforts by any government to control a country's population. In its inception in 1971, the government's "planned births" campaign emphasized marriage delay, more time between births, and fewer children, with voluntary participation but extensive pressure from local administrators. Concerns over continued

population pressures in the late 1970s led to the “one child” policy. Although this campaign succeeded in lowering the fertility rate, when coupled with traditional preferences for sons, the campaign also contributed to an increase in abortions of female fetuses, female infanticide, and neglect of female babies (Johnson 1996: 80-82; Klasen and Wink 2003: 282). It also gave rise to an aging population, decreased labor supply, and a fertility rate below 2 which is not enough for the population to replace itself. China ended its “one-child” policy in 2016, permitting married couples to have two children, with a view to sustaining healthy economic development (Buckley 2018).

Since the last few decades, Asia Pacific economies have recorded considerable declines in maternal mortality. The maternal mortality ratio per 100,000 live births in 1990 was 1010 in Cambodia, 905 in Laos, and 453 in Myanmar. These countries have made significant progress towards addressing the extremely high maternal mortality and attaining the Millennium Development Goal 5: Improve maternal health. In 2015, the maternal mortality rate was 161 in Cambodia, 197 in Laos, and 178 in Myanmar. Nevertheless, the low-income countries in the Asia Pacific still experience low rates of contraceptive usage, which raises the number of pregnancies, as well as shorter time durations between births. Gestational anemia can also be quite severe in the low-income economies, with the prevalence of anemia among pregnant women as high as 55.4 percent in Cambodia and 52.5 percent in Myanmar in 2015. Complications during pregnancy and childbirth, such as hemorrhage, high blood pressure, labor obstructions, and infection increase the risk of maternal mortality (Mellor and Rodgers 2001). Indirect causes, such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, hepatitis, and tuberculosis, account for almost 20 percent of maternal deaths (Lewis 2008). By comparison, maternal mortality rates in South Korea, Singapore, and Japan are amongst the lowest in the world. One explanation for why East

Asia's higher-income economies have been able to successfully prevent or treat childbirth complications is that virtually all births are attended by skilled health staff. In contrast, only 40.1 percent of births in Laos were attended by trained health personnel in 2012 (Word Bank databank). In general, contraceptive prevalence and births attended by skilled health staff have risen over time with rising per-capita incomes.

- **Education**

Just as healthy workers benefit from and contribute to the process of economic development, so do more educated workers (Khandke 2007). Education builds workers' cognitive and analytical skills, thus making them more productive to society. Economic studies also show that countries with high levels of educational attainment for their workers can adopt a wider range of existing technologies and contribute to the development of new technological advances. Not only does education have a strong impact on entire economies, but individuals, families, and communities also benefit profoundly from the opportunities presented by literacy gains, higher educational attainment, and increased resources devoted to school quantity and quality. Educating girls yields particular benefits over and above the schooling effects for boys. In particular, educated women have lower fertility rates, use public health facilities more efficiently, and have healthier and more highly educated children. Although the benefits of educating girls and women are well documented, and despite efforts by most Asia Pacific governments to promote education across the population, many countries in the region still have some gender inequity in educational participation and achievement.

Table 11.4 Adult Literacy in Asia Pacific by Gender

	Literacy rate, adult female (% of females ages 15 and above)				Literacy rate, adult male (% of males ages 15 and above)			
	1980	1990	2000	2015	1980	1990	2000	2015
Cambodia	..	..	..	75.0	..	..	..	86.5
Indonesia	57.7	75.3	..	93.3	77.5	88.0	..	97.1
Laos	..	..	58.5	79.4	..	..	81.4	90.0
Malaysia	61.2	..	..	..	78.1	..	..	..
Myanmar	..	..	86.4	..	..	..	93.9	..
Philippines	82.8	93.2	92.7	..	83.9	94.0	92.5	..
Singapore	74.0	83.0	88.6	95.2	91.6	95.1	96.6	98.6
Thailand	83.9	..	90.5	91.2	92.2	..	94.9	94.7
Vietnam	..	..	86.6	..	..	..	93.9	..
China	..	68.1	86.5	..	..	87.0	95.1	..

"World Bank Open Data | Data." Accessed 25 February 2019. https://data.worldbank.org/.

One of the most basic indicators of educational achievement is the adult illiteracy rate. The severity of the gender discrepancy in the Asia Pacific has fallen over time and is not as high as that found in South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. As seen in Table 11.4, both women and men across the Asia Pacific have experienced sizeable declines in illiteracy since 1980. For example, the literacy rate in Indonesia increased from 57.7 percent in 1980 to 93.3 percent in 2015 for women, and from 77.5 percent in 1980 to 97.1 percent in 2015 for men. The gender discrepancy in the literacy rate was and continues to be higher in lower-income economies such as Cambodia and Laos. Relatively small gender discrepancies by the year 2015 in Indonesia and Thailand reflect the aggressive use of education policies by their governments to achieve universal full enrollment rates at the primary-school level.

Most Asia Pacific economies have closed the gender gap in primary school enrollment rates. As demonstrated in Table 11.5—which reports gross enrollment rates in primary school in

Table 11.5 School Enrollment in Asia Pacific by Gender

	School enrollment, primary, female (% gross)			School enrollment, primary, male (% gross)			School enrollment, secondary, female (% gross)			School enrollment, secondary, male (% gross)		
	1990	2000	2016	1990	2000	2016	1990	2000	2016	1990	2000	2016
Brunei Darussalam	..	107.2	106.2	..	113.1	107.1	..	86.0	94.0	..	83.4	92.8
Cambodia	..	99.8	108.8	..	113.7	111.6	..	12.2	..	..	22.3	..
Indonesia	112.6	107.2	101.4	116.2	110.3	105.4	42.5	54.2	87.7	50.6	56.0	84.5
Laos	86.7	97.9	108.3	109.2	115.2	112.6	18.8	28.1	64.0	27.4	40.0	68.9
Malaysia	94.2	98.7	103.8	94.6	98.6	103.1	65.6	80.9	87.9	61.2	74.1	82.6
Myanmar	89.3	99.5	107.8	96.5	102.0	111.2	19.3	38.2	63.3	20.8	36.5	57.6
Philippines	109.1	..	109.0	111.0	..	112.7	73.4	..	93.3	70.7	..	85.2
Singapore	..	..	100.7	..	..	100.9	..	..	107.7	..	..	108.6
Thailand	..	96.2	100.9	..	99.0	100.5	29.1	..	118.3	27.9	..	118.9
Vietnam	..	106.0	110.1	..	111.4	109.8	..	..	..	..	..	..
China	120.5	..	101.2	133.9	..	100.6	31.6	..	..	42.9	..	..
Japan	100.2	98.0	98.4	99.8	97.6	98.0	95.9	100.2	102.7	93.6	98.6	102.0
Hong Kong	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	100.9	..	..	104.4
South Korea	105.6	101.3	97.1	105.1	99.9	96.9	91.1	96.3	99.8	94.6	95.7	99.7

Source: “World Bank Open Data | Data.” Accessed 25 February 2019. https://data.worldbank.org/.

1990, 2000, and 2016 — by the year 2016, enrollment rates either exceeded 100 percent or stood close to 100 percent for both female and males. Note that because some students enrolled in primary school are outside of the age range for the population of primary-school-age children, the reported rates can exceed 100 percent. Net enrollment rates, which exclude enrolled students who are outside of the age range from those enrolled in primary school, are considerably lower for some of the poorer economies. Gross enrollment rates at the secondary school level are also lower for low-income countries. In contrast, the richer economies of Singapore, Japan, and Hong Kong each have full enrollment at the secondary school level for both females and males, mostly reflecting legislation that mandates school enrollment up through the secondary level for all children. This pattern for the Asia Pacific is consistent with other developing regions: income growth typically translates into improved gender equality in education, particularly at the secondary school level (World Bank 2001: 19).

- **Labor Market**

As countries in the Asia Pacific have developed, women's participation in the labor market has changed distinctly compared to trends observed around the world. In countries with sizeable agricultural sectors and household-based farm production, women's participation in the labor market is usually high. In such economies, women are active in paid work, home production, and farm maintenance. As countries embark on the industrialization process, women's labor force participation begins to decline as they devote less time to household farm production and more time to non-market activities such as child care and household chores. In highly industrialized economies, women's participation in the labor market begins to rise again as women combine paid work with raising children. This U-shaped function, which has been

observed for numerous countries around the world, is supported by data for countries at different stages of development in the Asia Pacific in 1980s and 1990s (Cagatay and Ozler 1995; Goldin 1995).

Table 11.6 Labor Force Participation by Gender

	Labor force participation rate, male (% of male population ages 15+) (national estimate)				Labor force participation rate, total (% of total population ages 15+) (national estimate)			
	1980	1990	2000	2014	1980	1990	2000	2014
Cambodia	..	..	82.8	87.9	..	..	80.3	82.6
Indonesia	80.4	82.8	84.2	82.7	58.2	63.3	67.8	66.6
Lao PDR	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Malaysia	81.2	85.3	81.7	80.6	60.4	66.5	65.1	67.7
Myanmar	..	60.0	..	..	..	41.6	..	..
Philippines	45.2	81.8	80.3	75.4	29.5	64.5	64.3	62.2
Singapore	80.8	..	57.7	75.9	62.7	..	49.3	67.0
Thailand	87.8	87.7	80.6	78.7	82.2	81.9	72.7	69.8
Vietnam	..	..	76.1	81.7	..	..	72.3	77.0
China	..	85.0	82.9	..	..	79.2	76.8	70.6
Brunei Darussalam	..	..	..	72.5	..	..	..	65.6
Japan	79.8	77.2	76.4	70.4	63.3	63.3	62.4	59.4
Korea, Rep.	76.4	74.0	74.4	74.0	59.0	60.0	61.2	62.4
Hong Kong SAR, China	80.9	78.9	73.2	68.8	63.8	63.0	60.7	61.1

"World Bank Open Data | Data." Accessed 25 February 2019. https://data.worldbank.org/.

Trends changed in the 2000s and 2010s. Based on the data for 2014 in table 11.6, some of the highest labor-force activity rates for women are still found in the relatively low-income economies of Cambodia, Vietnam, and China. Cambodia, for example, experienced years of political turmoil, war, and enforced hardship that appear to have had a relatively greater impact on male mortality, eventually giving rise to women's increasing participation in the labor force. Female labor force participation slightly drops in middle-income countries such as Thailand and Malaysia. Female activity rates remain steady and do not significantly move upward in the

higher-income economies of Japan, Hong Kong, or Singapore. Therefore, it offers an exception to the U-shaped function that is prevalent across many countries in the world. The high-income countries in the Asia Pacific have experienced a steep drop in fertility. For example, the fertility rate of Japan, Hong Kong, and Singapore was 1.5, 1.2, and 1.2 respectively in 2015 (Table 11.3), which resulted in a shrinking working-age population and an exception to the dominant U-shaped function. In all the economies, men have higher labor-force activity rates than women. In addition to women's choices about entering the labor market, social attitudes towards women's presence in the workforce contribute to the gender differences in labor-force activity rates.

Because international standards do not include unpaid work within the home as a labor-force activity, and because women perform the bulk of unpaid household work, these official statistics present a misleading account of the time that women allocate toward work activities. Detailed studies of how individuals use all their time in all paid and unpaid activities have found

that in almost all regions around the world, women work more hours and have less leisure time than men (Ilahi 2000). In 2011, 31 percent of working-age women in the Philippines reported that they did not participate in the labor force because they had to perform household responsibilities compared to 3 percent of men reporting this (ADB 2013: 11). The 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians passed a groundbreaking resolution which defined work as "any activity performed by persons of any sex and age to produce goods and to provide services for use by others or for own use." In this way, the resolution recognized all legal, illegal, formal, informal, paid, unpaid, productive, and reproductive activities as work (UNDP and ILOP 2018: 66). Based on a national time-use survey in August-September 2014, the Ministry of Women in Malaysia assessed women's work burden and recommended ways to raise women's labor force participation (UNDP and ILOP 2018: 19).

A woman roasting Luwak coffee in Bali, Indonesia (photo by author)

In formal labor markets, gender differences in wages occur around the world, and the Asia Pacific is no exception. Japan and South Korea are notorious for having amongst the lowest manufacturing-sector wage ratios in the world, and wage ratios in most East Asian economies are generally lower than those found in Western Europe, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand (Chang and England 2011). Although the male wage premium has persisted over time across the region, most countries for which comparable data are available show some improvement in women's relative wages since 1990. For example, in Taiwan, the female to male wage ratio rose from 66 percent in 1978 to 78 percent by 2010 (Rodgers and Zveglich 2014). This increase in relative wages for women in the Asia Pacific is consistent with the trend in numerous countries in other regions that women's wages have been rising relative to those of men in recent decades (World Bank 2001).

A Kayan Lahwi/Paduang woman weaving a scarf in Chiang Mai, Thailand (photo by author)

These gender discrepancies in wages may be capturing gender differences in worker productivity characteristics such as education and skill. In particular, some of the gender gaps in wages may be explained by lower educational attainment or experience on the job for women compared to men. In addition, wage discrepancies may be capturing gender differences in occupations. For instance, the relative concentration of women in lower-paying occupations will contribute to an overall gender wage gap. Finally, because most of the wage ratios are based on daily, weekly, or monthly earnings, the reported wage discrepancies may also be capturing gender differences in the number of hours worked per day, week, or month. Numerous studies have attempted to explain the extent to which these gender differences in productivity characteristics, occupations, and hours worked help to explain the overall gender wage gap in countries around the world. The portion of the gender wage gap that cannot be explained by these factors is commonly attributed to wage discrimination against women. This unexplained portion is surprisingly large across industrialized and developing countries. For example, the gender wage gap that remains unexplained by gender differences in productivity characteristics, occupational attainment, and hours worked is about 15 log points on average from 2008 to 2015 in the Philippines (Zveglich *et al.* 2019). Although gender differences in skills not captured in the data could be responsible for some of this unexplained gap, wage discrimination by gender must also be considered as a source of the disparity in wages between women and men.

A woman weaving a basket in Chaing Mai, Thailand

(photo by author)

In addition to the pay they receive on the job, women may also be facing discrimination in hiring, training, and promotion decisions. This source of discrimination contributes to the clustering of women in certain lower-paying occupations and industries. Across the Asia Pacific, women are clustered in clerical jobs, service and sales work, and elementary occupations. Men, on the other hand, dominate production work in crafts and trades, as well as factory and machinery operations. More significantly, men dominate the high-paying legislative

and supervisory positions across countries. Some of this employment segregation by gender in the Asia Pacific can be explained by women's membership to unions, their migrant status, their work as domestic workers, and their engagement in informal employment (ILO 2018: 56). Inequitable access to training, gender-specific advertisements for jobs, employer practices of the "marriage bar," and state promotion of home-based work have all contributed to the exclusion of women from higher paying occupations and industries. Marriage bars are explicit employer policies that allow employers to avoid hiring married women and to fire single women if they become married. Some employers favor such policies because they want to avoid investing in the training of women who may later quit their jobs for family reasons, or they want to avoid paying maternity leave benefits for women who choose to combine work and family. Not only have these policies restricted women's employment opportunities, but they have also reduced women's bargaining power with employers in wage negotiations. With economic development, the employment distribution across occupations and industries has become more similar for women and men in a number of the Asia Pacific economies. For example, both female and male employees in Taiwan and Korea have recorded dramatic shifts out of low-skilled jobs—especially textiles and garments—into higher-skilled jobs—especially electrical and electronic equipment. This decline in job segregation may be partly responsible for the small improvement in women's relative wages in much of the region.

- **Political and Social Status**

Economic development and increasing integration have also brought substantial changes to women's position in society more broadly. Women have achieved improvements in their political representation and autonomy, they have benefited from the political advocacy of a

growing number of women's organizations, and their positions in local communities and even within the family have slowly strengthened. The progression toward women's more visible role in politics and society at large began well over a century ago. Before the 1900s under patriarchal-feudal or colonial systems of government, women generally did not hold political office or even formal jobs; most of their activity was constrained to farm work and housework. Growth and political change brought new employment opportunities, including positions in political parties and formal office. Nevertheless, there are still unmet challenges that obstruct the full integration of women in political power. Two brief examples illustrate how women experienced advancements as well as restrictions towards attaining political power.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, new opportunities for women became available as government administrators, Communist Party members, and leaders of social organizations (Xiaojiang and Jun 1998). Mao Zedong, the founding father of the People's Republic, said, "Women hold up half the sky" (Sun 2017). The new Communist government made it a top priority to establish women as valued members of families and as valued citizens of the country. Policy reforms actively supported women's participation in politics and helped create new women's organizations. In particular, the Electoral Law of 1953 first allowed women to run for public office, and a series of Communist Party mandates set quotas for the proportion of men and women in the top positions. The party supported global plights of women's rights. For example, President Xi Jinping announced a $10 million donation to UN Women. Nevertheless, no women got membership in the Communist Party's highest seven-member Politburo Standing Committee. Women's participation in the party's central committee declined from 6.4 percent in 2012 to 4.9 percent in 2017. Women have to follow mandatory retirement, which is up to 10 years earlier than men, with the assumption that their

service will be needed for grandchildren and elderly relatives. Chinese lawyers and feminists have been actively advocating for more women's leadership in powerful political positions (Tatlow 2018).

In another illuminating example, women in South Korea have also experienced slow but steady changes in their participation in the political arena. Achievement of women's suffrage in 1948, electing the first female legislator in 1949, the end of the Korean War in 1953, and the onset of rapid industrialization brought an infusion of women's groups who pushed for a greater presence for women in political positions (Lee 2019). These groups worked to mobilize women at the grassroots level, educate female voters, recruit and support female candidates for office, and stipulate numerical quotas by gender for party positions (Kim *et al.* 1998). South Korea introduced a mixed electoral system and reserved legislative quotas for female candidates in 2005. It is home to thousands of women's organizations, including two powerful umbrella organizations (the Korean National Council of Women and the Korean Women's Associations United) that have continued to press for women's improved social status.

Governments and women's organizations in many other Asia Pacific countries played an important role in promoting improved political, social, and economic opportunities for women. At all levels—including grass-roots movements, non-governmental organizations, national women's rights groups, and research institutions—women-centered groups have been pushing for changes in laws, institutions, and attitudes toward women's roles for well over a century. Women's movements in individual countries also gained strength from liberalized labor unions and the lifting of government restrictions on the rights of workers to organize and to strike. For example, Taiwan is one of the first countries in the world to introduce reserved quotas for women politicians in the 1950s. The government lifted martial law in 1987 and legalized strikes

in 1988, resulting in increased bargaining power for all workers, male and female in the country. In the 2013 elections, the country demonstrated the unusual feat of placing 34 percent of women in Legislative Yuan, which exceeded the 25 percent of women in 21 lower chambers that used candidate quotas (Yan 2016). Further adding support to causes pushed by women's movements, in recent decades industrialized countries have placed increasing pressure on Asia Pacific economies to adopt core labor standards, which include the elimination of discrimination. Bilateral and multilateral aid agencies have added further pressure for governments in the Asia Pacific to improve gender equality in basic legal and social rights, to prevent discrimination by sex, and to improve the provision of public services. These changes have slowly translated into gains for women in their access to schooling, healthcare, new job opportunities, bank credit, and political positions.

Even though women have achieved significant socioeconomic and formal political rights in recent decades in the Asia Pacific (Fleschenberg and Derichs 2011), women's participation in local-level governance does not reflect the success at the elite-level of political advancement. In the Asia Pacific, many women from political dynasties became prominent political leaders through their political ties to male politicians (Tatlow 2012). Examples include Megawati Sukarnoputri of Indonesia, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo of the Philippines, and Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar. In Indonesia, 41.7 percent of women who were elected to the national assembly in 2014 had some level of familial ties with established political leaders (Warat 2013). Amidst growing concerns about the influence of political dynasties in national politics, the Indonesian government passed a law in 2015 proposing an "anti-dynasty provision" (Trajano and Kenawas 2013). Grassroots women in the Asia Pacific are actively fighting the stereotypes of women political leaders gaining power from their association with political dynasties. Thai grassroots

women political organizers work closely with communities towards achieving the common good even though many of them lack public speaking experience, bureaucratic know-how, and institutional bases (Vichit-Vadakan 2008). The Asia Pacific is also observing a "middle pathway" to political empowerment, which Nankyung Choi defines as "pursuit of politics as a vocation through entrepreneurial experimentation with a diversity of strategies for acquiring and maintain political power." With the rapidly growing middle class in this region, educated, professional, and progressive women are utilizing both familial connections and grassroots organizing to pursue political careers (Choi 2018: 19).

Rapid industrialization, changing labor market structures, and legal reforms since the 1960s have brought changes not only to women's economic and political status but also to their status within the household. With the strong increase in labor force participation rates since the 1970s, women are waiting longer to become married and have children, they are having fewer children, and they are relying more on alternative childcare arrangements such as childcare centers. For example, the recorded number of marriages in South Korea in 2017 fell 6.1 percent from the previous year to 264,500, which is the lowest number since the country started to collect Census data (Yonhap 2018). Revisions in family law and property law have also made divorce a more feasible option for women. The traditional view of the family—in which husbands are the primary breadwinners and wives are the primary caregivers—has transformed into a more modern view—in which husbands and wives both participate in economic activities to support the family. The types of activities in which men and women are engaged have also changed, particularly in rural areas where husbands have left home for extended periods to work in urban areas, leaving women to take over most of the farm-based work. Yet changes in attitudes and household practices have come slowly, and as in most other parts of the world,

women are still responsible for the bulk of household production, including housework and childcare, even if they are employed in the formal labor market.

- **Legal Reforms to Promote Gender Equality**

Women in the Asia Pacific have benefited from a host of legal reforms in recent decades protecting their health and well-being, granting them more freedom and rights, and promoting their labor-market equality with men. Legal reforms have occurred in response to domestic pressure as well as international pressure through the forces of globalization and increased interaction with international agencies. Since the 1970s a series of influential conferences and publications sponsored by various United Nations organizations—particularly the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund—have publicized the extent of gender inequities and developed new initiatives to boost women's health, nutrition, and education status. Women's health and education rights have been addressed head-on at large international women's conferences in Mexico City (1975), Nairobi (1985), and Beijing (1995), and at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo.

Participants at the 1995 Beijing conference constructed a Platform for Action to guide policymakers and agencies around the world in better meeting women's health needs. This Platform for Action recognizes that women have unequal access to health resources, and in addressing this problem, identifies a number of objectives to help women attain improved health status. These objectives include passing legislation targeting behaviors that contribute toward the spread of HIV/AIDS among females, tackling social norms that subordinate women, designing programs for men to help them increase their involvement in the household, encouraging men to engage in responsible sexual and reproductive behavior, and ending the

exploitation of female sex workers (Mellor and Rodgers 2001). International agencies have placed a similarly high priority on improving school enrollment rates for girls and raising female literacy rates. In practice, strategies based on universal education requirements rather than more targeted attempts to educate girls have generally been the most successful reform effort to close the gender educational gap. The current focus on reforming women's health and education policies across the Asia Pacific mirrors the focus of these international efforts on gender equity in health and education. The region has been particularly successful compared to the world's other developing regions in closing the gender gap in educational attainment—particularly at the primary school level—by implementing universal schooling requirements.

In addition to advances in legal reforms improving women's access to health services and education, women have also experienced increased autonomy from legal reforms in family law and land ownership. Because family law covers personal issues such as marriage, divorce, custody of children, and property ownership, it is a contentious and politically charged area of law. Traditionally family law in the Asia Pacific has been highly skewed toward rights favoring men, fully sanctioning practices such as arranged marriages, polygyny, child-marriage, unequal rights to divorce, and female exclusion from inherited property. At times radical legal reforms have made these traditions less egregious and inequalities less severe in numerous countries. A notable example is China's Marriage Law of 1950, which aimed to eliminate bride-price and child marriage; allow women the right to choose their own spouses and demand a divorce; grant women the right to share control of their children; and allow women to inherit property. The Marriage Law successfully reduced the frequency of arranged marriages and polygyny, and it improved young women's domestic autonomy. However, its implementation caused widespread protests, particularly among males and older women, and may have been responsible for tens of

thousands of female suicides and murders (Das Gupta *et al.* 2000). South Korea brought revisions to its family laws in 1962, 1977, 1989, and 2005. South Korean women's grassroots organizing pushed for the 2005 revision which abolished the "family-head system." The revision also allowed mothers to pass on surnames to their offspring, abolished the ban of women's remarriage period, and bestowed women the right to deny maternity (ch'inseng) which was previously a father's right only (Yang 2008). Vietnam adopted a new Marriage and Family law which removed the ban on same-sex marriages in 2015 (Johnson 2015).

In another area of legal reform, women in the Asia Pacific have succeeded in gaining a stronger political voice. A fundamental set of rights that women in all but one of the region's economies acquired during the 1900s is the right to vote and stand for election on a universal and equal basis (UNDP 2001). Most often these rights were granted at the same time. In Brunei, no election has been held since 1962, which means neither women nor men can vote (Lane and Kenny 2018). Women in North Korea are allowed to vote and stand for election, but it is unclear when women gained these rights. With its political change to a constitutional monarchy in 1932, Thailand became the first Asia Pacific country to grant these rights to women. Myanmar gave women the right to vote just two years later, but in this country, women did not receive the right to stand for election until more than a decade later. The only other country that gave women these political rights in the 1930s was the Philippines. A large group of countries, including China and Japan, followed in the 1940s, and the final countries to pass this legislation (Cambodia, Malaysia, and Lao PDR) did so in the 1950s.

In addition to political reforms, Asian governments in recent decades have implemented a host of labor-market reforms protecting workers' rights. These reforms have sometimes been prompted by pressures put on governments by the activities of women's rights groups, domestic

and international labor movements, and international agencies. Further pressures have come from demographic changes and growth of the workforce. As a result of reduced child mortality rates, lower fertility rates, and the slowdown in population growth, a relatively large share of the population across the Asia Pacific is now of working age. New labor market laws across the region have included regulations aimed specifically at protecting female workers and promoting their equality with male workers. Most common across the region are mandated maternity benefits and equal-protection legislation.

Provisions on women's working hours, which include both night-work prohibitions and overtime limits, were widespread in formal-sector labor markets across the Asia Pacific up through the 1990s (Nataraj, Rodgers, and Zveglich 1998). As of the mid-1990s, only Singapore, Vietnam, and China had no working-hour restrictions for women. Night-work prohibitions constrain the time of day when workers can be employed, whereas overtime limits constrain the total number of hours that workers may work within a day. Governments typically implemented such legislation with the objective of safeguarding women's family time at home and ensuring their physical safety late at night. Advocates of these policies argued that they limit employer exploitation of female workers and encourage more women with household responsibilities who value shorter workdays to enter the labor force. However, critics argued that these policies are discriminatory and contribute to the persistence of occupational segregation. Because the measures make women's working-hour options less flexible, they hamper women's ability to compete with men for certain jobs. This criticism was supported with findings for Taiwan (Zveglich and Rodgers 2003). Taiwan's 1984 Labor Standards Law included both a night-work prohibition and overtime limits for women. These provisions were shown to have a significant dampening effect on women's employment, suggesting that firms' demand for female workers

dropped. The accumulation of such evidence combined with advocacy efforts from women's groups and worker rights organizations has led to the repeal of working hour restrictions in many Asia-Pacific countries in the past 20 years.

Most of the countries in the Asia Pacific offer paid maternity leave, often compensated fully and financed directly by employers. For example, Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei require employers to offer fully paid maternity leave. Among the few countries where employers are not required to pay for leave benefits – including Japan, Thailand, and Vietnam – women's compensation is financed through social security funds or insurance. The length of the maternity leave varies widely. Vietnam, for example, offers six month-long prenatal and postnatal leaves. Singapore offers 16 weeks. The Philippines offers two weeks before the expected date of delivery and another four weeks after delivery. The maternity leave legislation in most countries includes employment protection clauses whereby, at a minimum, women cannot be fired during the leave period. For example, terminating a woman's employment because of pregnancy can result in up to six months of imprisonment and/or fines of not more than USD 15,000 in Thailand. Vietnam extends the protection from maternity leave to marriage and raising a child under 12 months old and prohibits termination of the labor contract for those reasons. It requires that female employees should be guaranteed to return to the same post after their maternity leave (ASEAN 2014: 27-33). Many countries also have a policy that allows women to take paid nursing breaks. Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos offer one hour break per day to breastfeeding mothers for up to one year following childbirth. Indonesia requires that employers should provide suitable place for nursing babies during work hours (ASIAN 2014: 27-34).

Maternity leave benefits can facilitate the realization of important labor-market and social objectives. In particular, maternity benefits strengthen women's attachment to the labor force

and increase their firm-specific tenure and training, which in turn can enhance the productivity of female workers (Waldfogel 1998). More broadly, maternity leave benefits can also improve the well-being of babies by enabling working mothers to spend more time with their infants in the crucial early months (Ruhm 2000). On a cautionary note, these benefits entail pecuniary costs that may be passed along to female workers in the form of lower wages, particularly if the mandated benefits are financed by employers. Studies in many countries have demonstrated that the more the new mothers stay away from work, the less likely they are to advance in their careers and the more likely to be demoted and fired. Women who take longer leaves are often viewed as less committed to work by their coworkers (Hideg *et al.* 2018). In addition, even though maternity leave legislation is widespread across the Asia Pacific, a considerable number of female workers are employed in firms or job categories that are not covered by maternity leave legislation, are unaware of their rights to maternity leave, or are employed in covered firms that do not comply with the law. Priority should be given in future rounds of labor law reforms across the region to providing a wider range of women workers with maternity leave benefits. Steps such as removing sectoral and firm size exemptions, raising worker awareness of their leave entitlements, and improving enforcement will all work toward this objective.

More "family-friendly" labor market policies are needed to help address the needs of working parents and their children. Parental leave statutes alongside maternity leave legislation will support fathers in their efforts to take on more responsibility for childcare. Also, some governments have already increased their attempts to shift the financial burden of childcare provision away from individual families and to extend access to quality childcare services. For example, South Korea relaunched a state-allowance program in 2013 to make childcare cost-free for all parents. The state spent $7.74 billion on this program in 2016, and the budget has been

increasing. Even though the program has its limitations - for example, a limited number of state-run daycare centers or kindergartens and the high cost of private institutions - it played a significant role in ensuring affordable childcare for all citizens (Lee 2018). Government involvement in childcare provision and support is becoming more appropriate for economies in the Asia Pacific as family structures move away from the extended family system, fertility rates decline, and the share of women employed in paid jobs grows. Childcare assistance serves as a useful complement to maternity and parental leave statutes in supporting working parents.

Even the richest countries in the Asia Pacific have high gender pay gaps. For example, Japan's gender pay gap is 25.7 percent, which is still a sign of improvement from 32.8 percent in 2005. In South Korea, women earn 63 percent of their male counterparts (Fensom 2017). In an effort to raise women's relative wages and improve their labor-market opportunities, numerous Asia Pacific governments have adopted legislation that promotes equal treatment of women and men in the workplace. The two most common types of such policies are equal-pay and equal-opportunity measures. These measures do not single out women for protection or special treatment, but they do have the explicit goal of enhancing women's labor market outcomes by eliminating discrimination against women in pay and employment. The "equal pay for equal work" clause requires employers to provide the same pay for workers who perform the same job with equal effort, regardless of gender. In theory, the equal-pay clause should increase the earnings of women relative to men with similar qualifications who work in the same job categories. The majority of countries in the Asia Pacific region have adopted legislation mandating equal pay for equal work. However, the legislation is often not enforced because governments do not have enough resources to create viable enforcement mechanisms. For example, article 31 of the Constitution of Cambodia recognizes women's rights (Committee on

the Elimination of Discrimination against Women 2011: 9) and article 8 of the draft Minimum Wage Bill 2016 requires that equal remuneration should be paid to all workers regardless of their sex (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Cambodia 2018: 7). Nevertheless, the gender wage gap in Cambodia increased over time. In 2004, Cambodian women earned 92 percent of men's wages, but they earned 83 percent in 2014 (Reid 2018).

In addition to enforcement problems, employment segregation by gender also limits the effectiveness of an equal pay clause. In particular, legislation that requires equal pay for equal work within an occupation and enterprise will have little impact on women's relative wages if women are segregated by occupation and industry (Blau and Kahn 1995). Occupational segregation limits women's choices and clusters them in lower-skilled and lower-paid jobs throughout the Asia Pacific (ILO 2017). Fewer than half of the Asia Pacific governments have attempted to tackle the occupational segregation problem with policies that improve women's access to occupations in which they formerly had few opportunities. These provisions prohibit sex-based discrimination in many aspects of employment, including hiring, training, promotion, and firing. Economies with such legislation include Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, and China. In theory, equal-opportunity policies should contribute positively to women's relative earnings and their range of job options. However, in practice, equal opportunity legislation has had a rather lackluster performance in the Asian economies (Behrman and Zhang 1995). For example, South Korea's Gender-Equal Employment Act of 1987 created new opportunities for women in higher-paying professional and technical jobs, but the legislation does not appear to have helped women break through the more formidable glass ceiling in administrative and supervisory positions. In South Korea, women hold only 10.5 percent of all management positions in the private sector, which is the lowest among all OECD

countries. South Korea also ranks the lowest in terms of women's representation in the company board of directors (OECD 2017). In 2017, the government of South Korea initiated a new and more binding five-year plan for ensuring a higher number of female public officials (Bloomberg 2017).

While they are not explicitly designed to target women's well-being or equality in the labor market, seemingly "gender-blind" policies can also have labor market outcomes that differ for women and men. For example, a minimum wage policy may have no gender content in its stated aims, yet in practice, it can affect female and male workers differently. The minimum wage policy is highly prevalent around the world, including the Asia Pacific, and it can have disproportionately negative effects on women's labor market outcomes. In particular, the minimum wage primarily protects workers in the urban formal sector, whose earnings already exceed by a wide margin the earnings of workers in the rural and informal sectors. Any employment losses caused by an increase in the minimum wage in the regulated formal sector translate into more workers seeking jobs in the unregulated informal sector. The end result could actually be lower, not higher, wages for most poor workers.

Evidence on the impact of the minimum wage on women's wages and the gender wage gap is mixed essentially because it depends on the extent to which employers comply with the legislation. Greater noncompliance for female workers has been documented for a number of countries across developing regions. In Asia, Hallward-Driemeier et al. (2015) showed that increases in Indonesia's minimum wage contributed to a smaller gender wage gap among more educated production workers but a larger gap among production workers with the least education. The authors suggest that more educated women have relatively more bargaining power which induces firms to comply with the minimum wage legislation.

Looking more broadly at the gendered effects of minimum wage on measures of wellbeing, Menon and Rodgers (2013) found that restrictive labor market policies in India that favored workers (including the minimum wage) contribute to improved job quality for women for most measures. However, such regulations bring fewer benefits for men. Estimates indicate that for men, higher wages come at the expense of fewer hours, substitution toward in-kind compensation, and less job security. Looking beyond labor market effects, Del Carpio et al. (2014) analyzed the impact of provincial level minimum wages on employment and household consumption in Thailand and found that exogenously set regional wage floors are associated with small negative employment effects for women, the elderly and less-educated workers, but large positive wage gains for working-age men. These wage gains contributed to increases in average household consumption.

- **Conclusion**

Women in the Asia Pacific have made great strides in closing the gender gap in health, education, and labor market outcomes. Progress for achieving gender equity has occurred largely as a result of overall economic development, but also as a result of concerted efforts by governments, activist groups, and international organizations to design and implement effective legal reforms. In a virtuous circle, women's relative gains in their health, education, and labor-market productivity have increasingly empowered them to stand up for their rights and push for continued legal reforms. At the same time, women's activism and legal reforms focused on gender equity have contributed positively to closing the gender gap in health status, educational attainment, and labor-market performance.

Yet more progress must be made, and the areas needing work are numerous. As just one example, most legal reforms in the labor market have been limited to formal-sector workers. Addressing the problems faced by female workers in the rural and informal sectors has proven far more difficult precisely because these women are employed in small-scale, unregulated operations that remain economically viable due to the low labor costs. Policy changes are crucial to better support women in rural and unregulated jobs and to provide them with greater access to formal sector jobs. These policy efforts include—but are certainly not limited to—providing girls and women with more education and job-specific training, extending labor standards and their enforcement to smaller-scale operations whenever feasible, targeting agricultural extension services and technologies to women, and increasing women's access to credit and financial services. As specific examples, women can be encouraged to participate in community-based labor-rights groups, or they can be provided with small loans in more micro-credits initiatives that focus on lending to women. These policy changes can help women to become more independent, engage in new entrepreneurial activities, and build their qualifications for new job opportunities.

More broadly, the erosion of social norms and traditional values favoring men, the maintenance of sound macroeconomic environments, and the continued reform of policies addressing gender equity are all crucial for sustained progress in improving women's well-being. The Asia Pacific already stands out among other regions for the remarkable macroeconomic progress recorded by many countries in the region. This growth record, when combined with continued strong commitments by communities, employers, and governments to addressing women's rights, give the region the potential to also stand out for achieving gender equity on all fronts.

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