

DISRUPTIVE ASIA 2021-22

Women and Girls Special Edition

ABOUT ASIA SOCIETY AUSTRALIA

Preparing Australians for engagement with a more complex Asia.

Asia Society Australia is Australia's leading global think-tank and membership organisation dedicated to Asia, focusing on the interplay between business and policy.

We connect business, policy and society, helping Australians to understand and engage with Asia and to navigate our shared futures.

We are a national, independent, non-partisan, and non-political institution with a national centre in Melbourne, an office in Sydney, and programs accessible in Australia and globally through digital and face-to-face platforms.

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Women and Girls Special Edition

ABOUT DISRUPTIVE ASIA

Disruptive Asia is a research and public policy project by Asia Society Australia, launched in 2017 to celebrate Asia Society's 20th anniversary in Australia.

Disruptive Asia presents – through long-form essays – new and diverse perspectives on Asia's rise as the epicentre of global economy and geostrategic competition, and its impact on Australia's foreign policy, economy and society.

Since 2017, Asia Society Australia has published four volumes of Disruptive Asia focusing on Australia-Asia relations, China, South-East Asia, and sustainability, with over 100 essays authored by leading thinkers and practitioners.

The views expressed in this publication are the authors' own and do not represent those of the Asia Society.
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ABOUT THE COVER IMAGE

In traditional Hinduism, widows are expected to renounce pleasure and enjoyment after the death of their husbands. They can't celebrate Holi, the festival of colour, and are expected to wear white instead. But a few years ago, thousands of Indian widows took part in the festival, breaking 400 years of tradition and stepping away from societal pressures. We wanted the symbolism of this newfound empowerment to be at the forefront of our Disruptive Asia Women and Girls edition.

The national conversation about Australia's relationship with Asia has never been more critical. Disruptive Asia continues to be the leading multi-year, multi-disciplinary publication examining Australia's ever-evolving place in the region.

We hope you can join the conversation.

Philipp Ivanov

*Chief Executive Officer
Asia Society Australia*

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FOREWORD

Asia Society Australia dedicates this year's edition of *Disruptive Asia* to women and girls.

From the Kolkata widows breaking years of tradition to celebrate Holi to the young women leading the protests in Thailand; from two female Japanese lawmakers making a pitch for the nation's top job to the movement to expose the culture of sexual harassment in Australia's Parliament: women are changing Asia and paving the way for the next generations of leaders.

Yet, gender discrimination is alive and well. And while there has been progress over the last decades, the pandemic has intensified existing inequalities in health, education, access to employment, governance, and security.

To shift the dial on gender by 2030, it is imperative to put women and girls at the centre of the regional and global recovery efforts and build a more inclusive and resilient society.

Asia Society Australia wants to be part of this effort. In *Disruptive Asia: Women and Girls*, we bring you some of the best minds from Australia and the region to address these issues.

With Greg Earl as our Editor-in-Chief, the volume is structured in three parts – business and economy, politics, and social structures – that explore multiple dimensions of the need for and the potential for empowering women in the region.

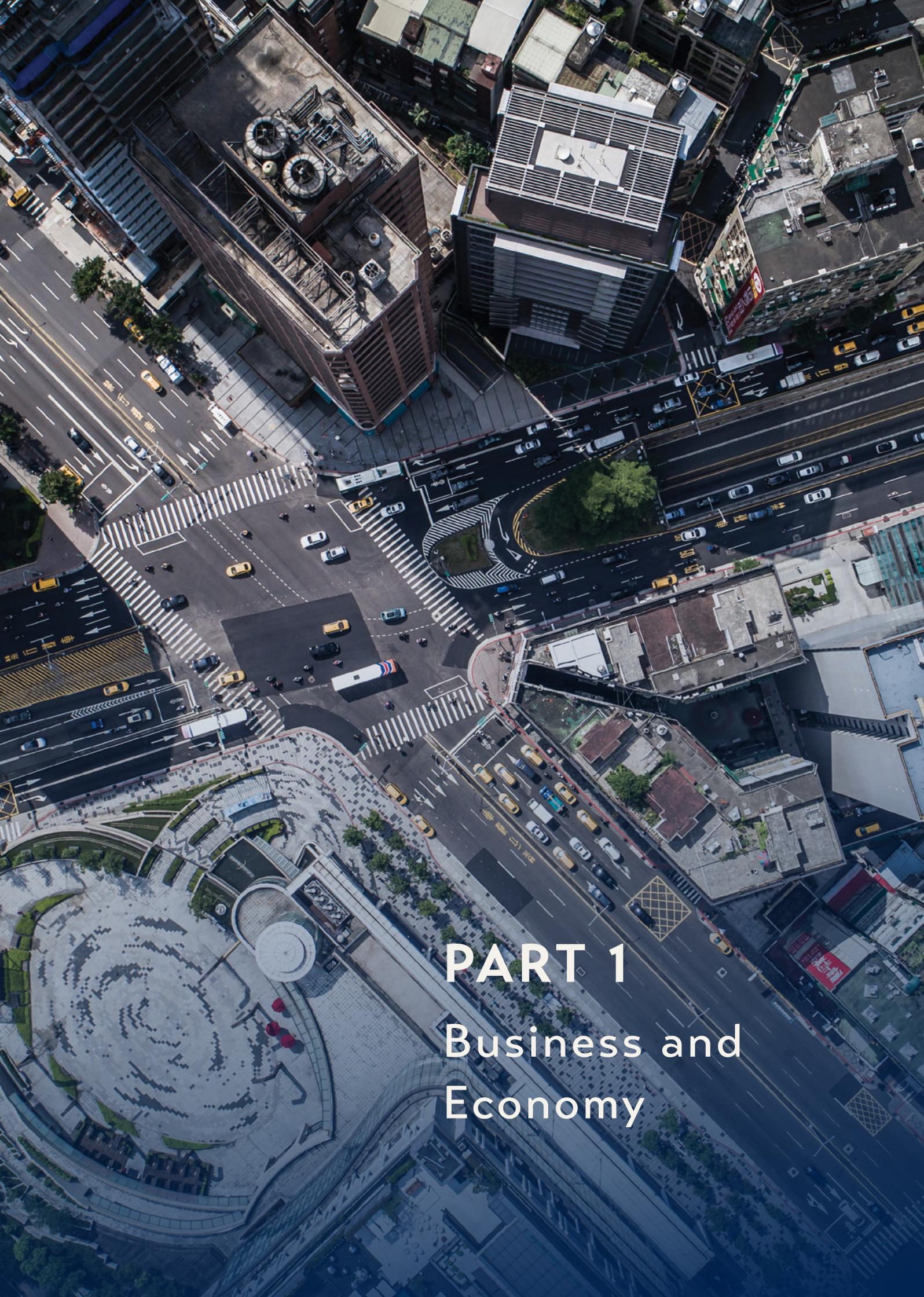
We hope these 17 essays will provoke debate, showcase diverse voices and contribute to the ongoing conversation about gender equality in Asia and Australia.

Lena Duchene

Convenor, Disruptive Asia 2021-2022 Edition

Program Manager

Asia Society Australia



PART 1

Business and Economy

The Power of Parity in Asia: Improving Policies in the Workplace to Support Women Better



The goal of achieving gender equality in the workplace is not just the right thing to do; it makes sense for companies' bottom lines and for the wider economy, particularly as the region looks to recover from the pandemic's impacts. The good news is that corporate leaders can undertake a series of workplace policy changes that can make that goal a reality.

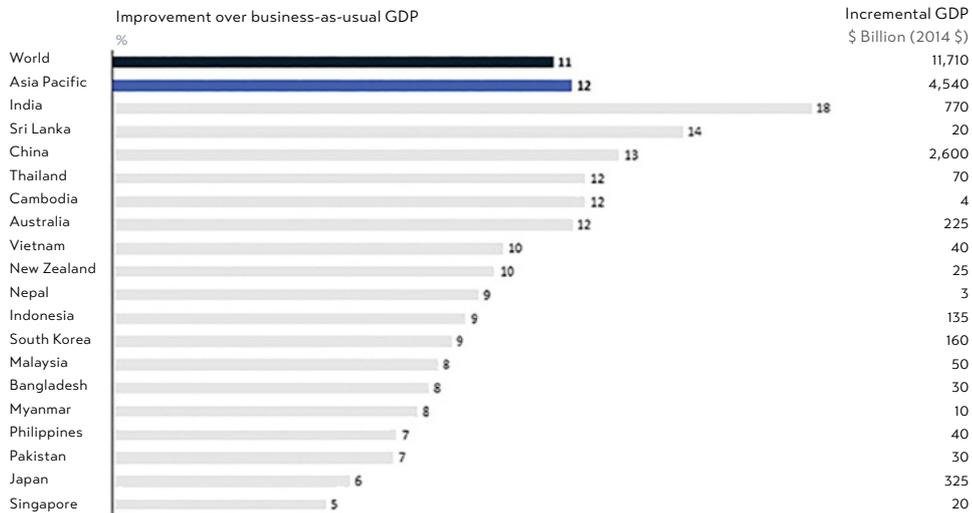
Advancing women's equality in countries across Asia Pacific could add US\$4.5 trillion to their collective annual GDP by 2025 – a 12 per cent increase over the business-as-usual trajectory. This statistic shows how important gender parity is for the region's

macroeconomic performance as it continues to wrestle with COVID-19. To realise this value, however, businesses, regulators and societies need to support women's empowerment in the workplace.

Exhibit 1

In a best-in-region scenario, Asia Pacific could add \$4.5 trillion to annual GDP by 2025, or 12 percent above business as usual

Incremental 2025 GDP from improving gender equality at the best-in-region rate



Source: ILO; World Input Output Database; Oxford Economics; IHS; national statistical agencies; McKinsey Global Growth Model – Power of Part 2018; McKinsey Global Institute analysis

Three economic levers are key to achieving this. First, raising the female-to-male labour-force participation ratio could contribute 58 per cent of the total GDP opportunity. Second, increasing the

The relationship between the diversity of executive teams and the likelihood of financial outperformance has strengthened over time.

number of paid hours women work could create 17 per cent of the GDP opportunity. Finally, having more women work in higher-productivity sectors could contribute the remaining 25 per cent of economic value.

We have also found that the relationship between the diversity of executive teams and the likelihood of financial outperformance has strengthened over time. Analysis we undertook in 2019 found that companies in the top quartile of gender diversity on executive teams were 25 per cent more likely to experience above-average profitability than peer companies in the fourth quartile. With such strong business and societal cases for achieving gender parity, the time is now for companies to start making active changes in the workplace.

Asia has seen modest and uneven progress, worsened by the pandemic

Countries across Asia-Pacific have made some advances in recent decades to improve gender equality, but overall progress has been modest and the results uneven.

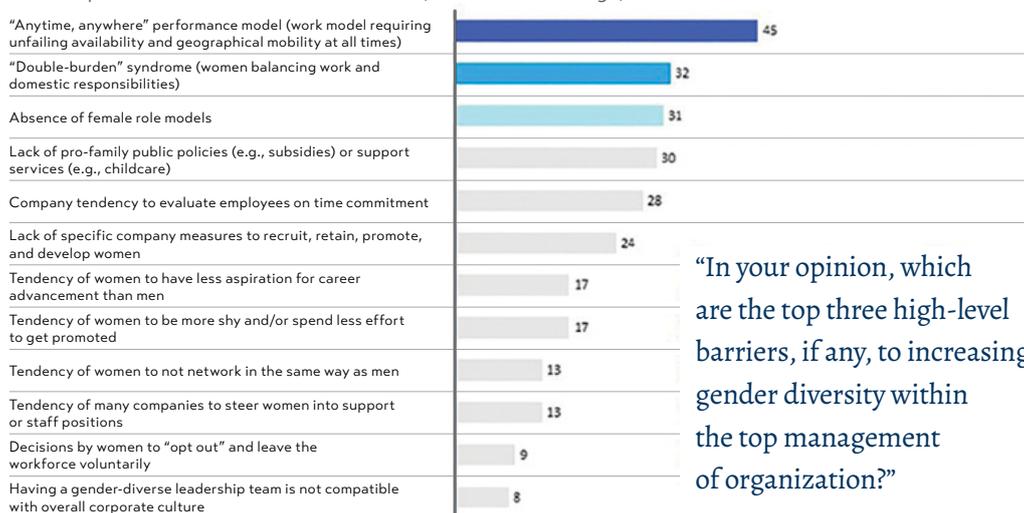
In 2018, women made up 38 per cent of the labour force in Asia Pacific, contributing 36 per cent of combined GDP. By 2021, women’s participation in the workforce has improved, but not everywhere. According to the International Labor Organisation, from 1990 to 2019, the female-to-male labour force participation ratio rose by ten percentage points in Japan and South Korea, nine percentage points in Malaysia, and five percentage points in Australia. But it has declined by six percentage points in China and by eight percentage points in India over the same period.

For both China and India, the decline reflects a complex web of related factors, including but not limited to challenges in accessing childcare, inequity in labour market conditions for men and women, and rising incomes. In the case of China, it is notable that despite the decline in labour force participation, women still contribute 41 per cent to GDP, the highest share in the Asia-Pacific region.

Exhibit 2

Top barriers perceived by women across Asia Pacific include insufficient flexibility in work, work-life balance, female role models, and childcare

Women’s views on barriers to improving gender diversity vary across Asia Pacific
 % of respondents who selected the barrier (Asia Pacific average)



“In your opinion, which are the top three high-level barriers, if any, to increasing gender diversity within the top management of organization?”

Source: McKinsey proprietary database – Women Matter survey 2015; McKinsey Global Institute analysis

Before the pandemic, we asked 700 senior managers to find out what women thought was holding back gender parity. Some 45 per cent of the respondents said the biggest hurdle was the “anytime, anywhere” performance model, where companies require staff to be available and geographically mobile at all times. The next most-cited barriers were the double burden of balancing work and domestic responsibilities, the lack of female role models, and the lack of family-friendly workplace policies.

These challenges remain and have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our analysis shows that during the crisis, jobs held by women have been 19 per cent more at risk than those held by men because women are disproportionately represented in sectors negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Women’s obligations to take care of their families have also increased, where for example in India, the burden of unpaid care and housework increased by around 30 per cent during the pandemic. In South Asia, women’s share of unpaid care work can be up to 80-90 per cent. Our research found that there is a negative correlation between female labour force participation rates and unpaid care work.

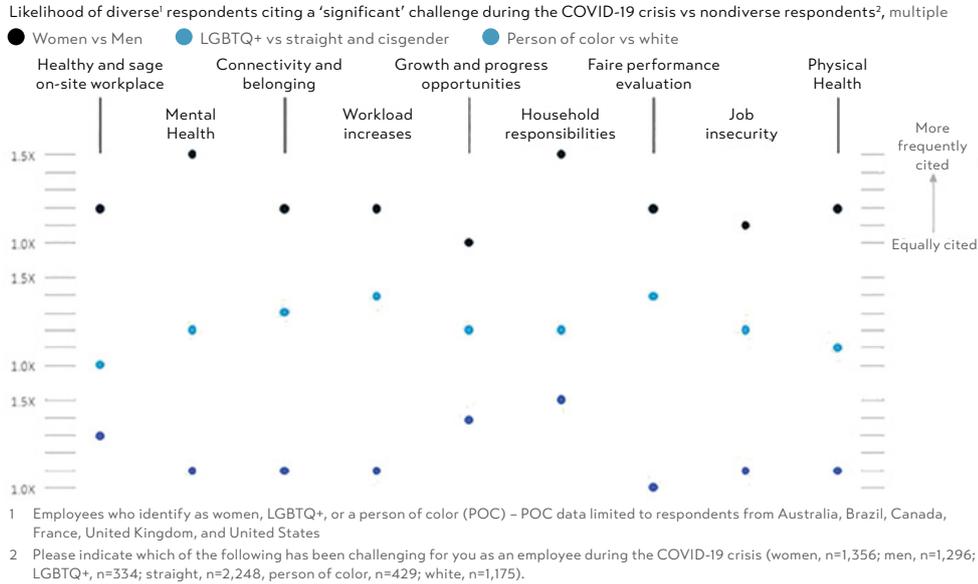
In September 2020, Australia reported that only 64 per cent of women with children under five years old participate in the labour force, compared to 95 per cent of men with children of a similar age.

Women have also faced disproportionate stress through the pandemic. McKinsey’s global survey in 2020 of 1,122 executives and 2,656 employees across 11 countries including Australia, China and India showed that, in all geographies, women are facing more difficult challenges than men across personal and professional fronts during the pandemic.

Women are 1.5 times as likely as men to cite acute challenges with mental health and increased household responsibilities, as well as 1.2 times as likely to cite difficulties with workload increases, connectivity and belonging in the workplace, having a healthy and safe worksite, performance reviews, and physical health. In total, more than 60 per cent of women in emerging economies are suffering from acute or moderate challenges. This is double the rate of their peers in developed economies. Our survey also showed that a large share of employees expect workload increases to be an ongoing challenge.

Exhibit 3

Women, LGBTQ+ employees, and people of color are more likely to report acute challenges during the pandemic



Source: McKinsey 2020 Global Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion/ COVID-19 Employee Experience Survey

This year, our annual *Women in Workplace 2021* study, published in collaboration with LeanIn.org, reported that one in three women say that all these challenges have led them to consider downshifting their career or leaving the workforce, a significant increase from one in four a few months

Women are still overrepresented in the informal sector

into the pandemic. Additionally, four in ten women have considered leaving their company or switching jobs and

high employee turnover in recent months suggests that many are following through.

At the same time, women are still overrepresented in the informal sector: an estimated 58 per cent of employed women work in the informal sector, globally. These jobs are more at risk during the pandemic and without social or labour protections, and fewer benefits, these women face greater risks of disruptions to their livelihoods. The UN reports that workers in the informal sector lost on average 60 per cent of their usual income.

What it means for organisations to actively support women in the workplace

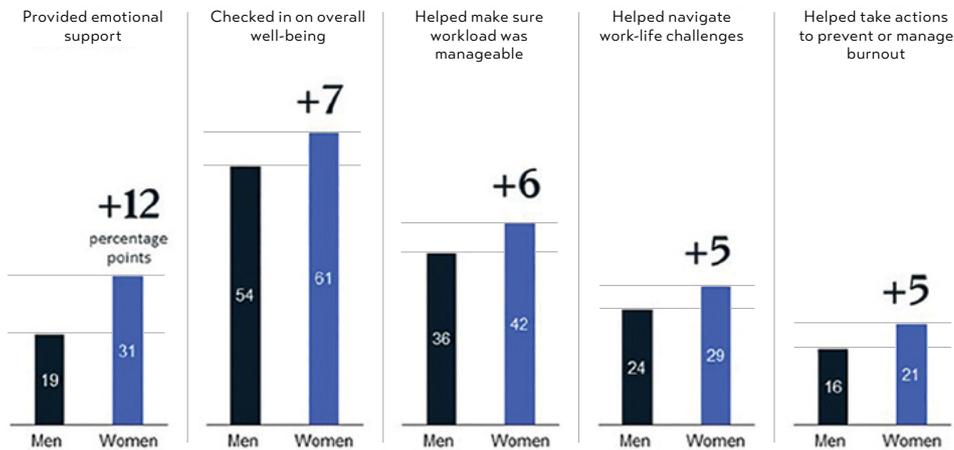
Our research is clear: first, what is good for greater gender equality is also good for the economy and society at large. Second, despite the difficulties brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disproportionately affected women more than men, we still see that women have risen to the challenge.

We found that women leaders have been stepping up and are doing more to support the people on their teams, for example, by helping team members navigate work-life challenges, ensuring that their workloads are manageable, and spending more time on diversity and inclusion work, such as recruiting employees from underrepresented groups.

Exhibit 4

Employees with women managers are more likely to say that their manager has supported and helped them over the past year.

Action taken by managers to support employees, by manager's gender, % of respondents



Source: Women in the Workplace 2021, LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, 2021

Many companies are also pursuing steps that can lay the groundwork for better diversity and inclusion. In our survey cited above, we asked executives how they have adjusted and expanded their working policies to support employees during the pandemic. The results show that, across the board, companies have undertaken changes that, together, have not only helped them to survive the pandemic, but which have formed a base for building a more inclusive and diverse workforce.

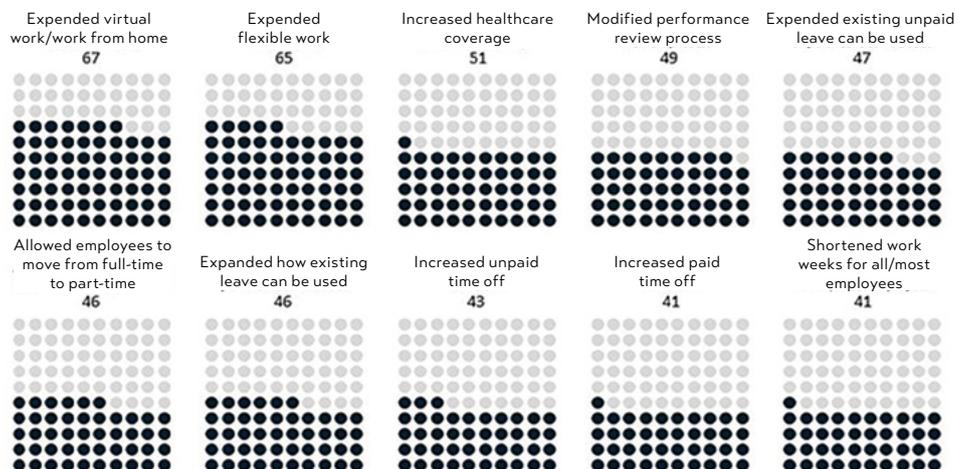
Our survey showed that around two-thirds of companies have expanded their virtual, remote, and flexible

working policies. Meanwhile, more than 40 per cent of companies had undertaken five more employee policy shifts, all of which could support a more inclusive workplace for women, even though the policies were initially aimed at supporting their overall workforce during the pandemic. These five are: allowing employees to move from full-time to part-time work, expanding how existing paid leave can be used, increasing unpaid time off, increasing paid time off, and shortening the work week for most if not all employees.

Exhibit 5

Companies have adjusted and expanded policies to support employees.

Policy changes implemented to support employees during the COVID-19 crisis¹, % of respondents



¹ Question: Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, which of the following policy changes has your company implemented to support your workforce? (n=1,122 executives globally).

Source: McKinsey 2020 Global Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion/ COVID-19 Executive Survey

These working policy changes can form the basis of a push to increase inclusion and diversity in companies' workforces. There are three key important levers – hiring, promotion, and retention.

Companies can recognise and reward women leaders who are driving progress and doing deep cultural work to create an inclusive and valued workplace.

Within hiring, there is a renewed importance for companies to expand their talent pools, build diverse candidate and interviewer slates, and ensure job descriptions, resume screening and interview processes are free from

unintended bias. Companies can also consider workplace re-entry programmes for women who are looking to come back to the workforce.

To improve the promotion rates of women and ensure there are senior women leaders, companies can develop mentorship and sponsorship programs to help women build support networks needed to succeed. Companies can recognise and reward women leaders who are driving progress and doing deep cultural work to create an inclusive and valued workplace. Incorporating diversity analytics into succession planning processes can help ensure senior leaders are being thoughtful about roles and promotion opportunities for underrepresented colleagues. Finally, engaging managers and senior leaders in equity and inclusion-focused trainings can help them build muscles around recognizing bias and overcoming it.

Improving the retention of women and other under-represented groups has become especially important given the unequal impacts of the pandemic. Initiatives such as strengthening employee resource groups, expanding participation in leadership-development programs, and prioritising career-development planning have become critical to strengthening inclusion. Companies can also take bold steps to address burnout by building on some of the changing ways of working. A great example is the shift to technology-enabled remote working, which with its increased flexibility can facilitate the retention of women. Finally, companies can also offer reskilling and upskilling programmes for underrepresented employees to ensure retention rather than hiring new talent.

Taking gender parity outside the office

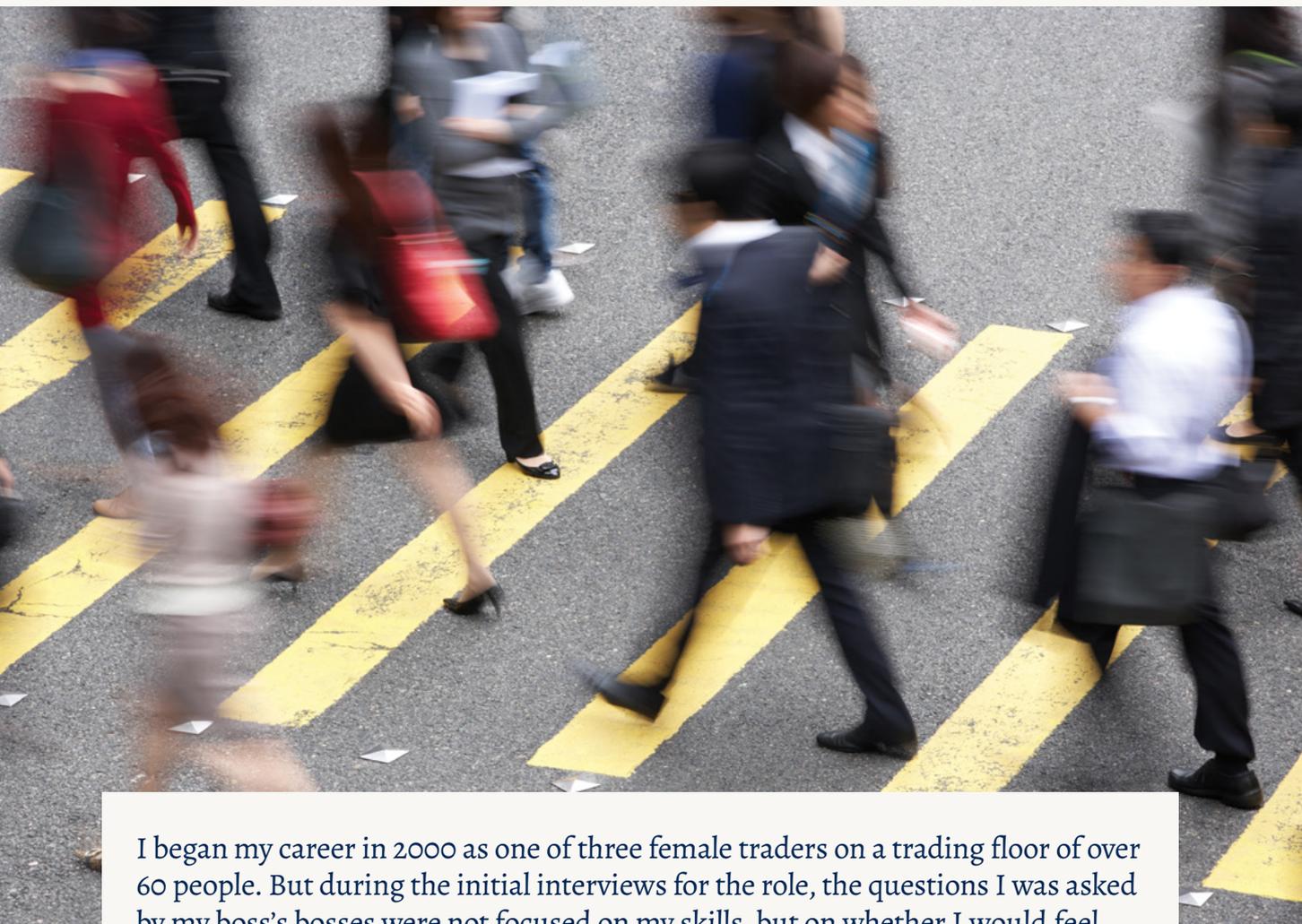
Companies can also work to improve gender parity outside of their own offices. Some companies are asking their ecosystems (e.g. suppliers, contractors) to also work to improve the representation of women in the workforce by hiring more women and sourcing from women-owned businesses. Companies can also ensure their philanthropic or research efforts align with their diversity, equity, and inclusion goals.

Across all these efforts, it is important for companies to set measurable aspirations and goals around representation and levels of inclusion. These goals can be accompanied by visible support or public commitments from senior leaders, which further highlight the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion to employees. Progress against these should be monitored regularly and can be shared with employees or other stakeholders through townhalls or other forums.

The business case for inclusion and diversity is stronger than ever. For companies with diverse leadership teams, the likelihood of outperforming industry peers on profitability has increased over time, while the penalties are getting steeper for those lacking diversity. Although progress on representation in Asia has been modest, a few firms are making real strides. The pandemic has shown that it is equally important to strive for gender equality both when it comes to women in the workplace and generally in society. There is an opportunity to build on the changes necessitated by the pandemic to advance women's inclusion in the workplace. There is a multi-trillion dollar opportunity here, which must not be wasted.

Diaan-Yi Lin is a Senior Partner, Asilah Azil is an Associate Partner, and Aarthi Sridhar is a consultant in McKinsey's Singapore office. The authors wish to thank Maria Martinez, Tiffany Burns, Sundiatu Dixon-Fyle, Kevin Dolan, Jess Huang, Mekala Krishnan, Alexis Krivkovich, Anu Madgavkar, Sara Prince, Ishanaa Rambachan, Irina Starikova, and Lareina Yee for their contributions to this article.

Trading up: a diversity campaign in Hong Kong's clubby business world



I began my career in 2000 as one of three female traders on a trading floor of over 60 people. But during the initial interviews for the role, the questions I was asked by my boss's bosses were not focused on my skills, but on whether I would feel comfortable working in a predominantly male environment.

The financial services and investment management industry have taken significant strides towards improving gender diversity since then.

However, throughout my career as a trader in investment banks and hedge funds I have never had the experience of a female role model or boss. I believe that representation matters and that young women joining the industry today should be able to benefit from female role models.

Another reason I am passionate about improving gender diversity in this profession is because it will boost performance. I have seen all the positive

It is about better leadership, better corporate governance, and ultimately about increasing corporate performance for companies and their shareholders.

impacts of diversity in decision-making — whether it is on a trading floor, in an investment committee, or on a company board. It is about better leadership, better corporate governance, and ultimately about increasing corporate performance for companies and their shareholders. It is

not only the “right” thing to do in terms of equality, but the smart thing to do in terms of performance. A 2021 Credit Suisse Gender 3000 report shows a pattern of greater diversity coinciding with better EBITDA margins across time, better cash returns, higher margins, higher and less-volatile returns, better credit ratings, and higher equity-market valuations – a sort of “diversity premium”.

So, if we believe that diversity improves decision-making, then it is even more critical now, as companies navigate the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. In our engagements with investee companies, we have seen that, in this moment of crisis, many corporates are more willing to take advice. They are more willing to hear from shareholders on all kinds of issues. They have a renewed sense of urgency to bolster their businesses to weather the pandemic and related crises, and a renewed sense of urgency to manage their teams in a remote world. As shareholders, we must act at this moment to engage in improving diversity.

Asia's boards lag the world

While all-male boards are more and more a thing of the past for many companies worldwide, women remain vastly underrepresented in corporate boardrooms and progress to change this trend continues to be slow, especially in Asia.

Around the world, women now hold 24 per cent of corporate board seats according to the 2021 Credit Suisse Gender 3000 report, compared to 20.7 per cent in 2019, and the percentage of women in C-suite senior management positions has grown from

17.6 per cent to 19.9 per cent. Regionally, Asia-Pacific continues to trail other regions in appointing women to corporate boards, despite a few encouraging signs.

In Hong Kong women hold only 14 per cent of listed companies' board seats and a [report](#) by the Hong Kong Institute of Chartered Secretaries released this year suggests that progress towards change has been glacial. In 2011, 10.5 per cent of directors of Hong Kong-listed company boards were women, so there has been an overall improvement of less than 4 percentage points over the last decade. Despite its status as the largest fundraising venue in the world in seven of the past 11 years, when it comes to gender diversity on boards, Hong Kong falls behind Australia/New Zealand; with 33.5 per cent female representation on boards; Malaysia; with 27.4 per cent; Singapore (20.1 per cent); India (17.3 per cent), Philippines (16.9 per cent); Thailand (16.2 per cent) and soon; Japan (11.5 per cent). That's not to mention [other global financial hubs](#) to which Hong Kong aspires to benchmark itself, like the UK (35.3 per cent) and the US (28.1 per cent).

According to BoardEx data, Hong Kong ranks twenty-fifth out of 27 countries for the average percentage of women on boards, with just Russia and Brazil trailing (close) behind. Whereas all of the companies in the S&P 500 have at least one female director, and only seven of the Topix 100 firms have all-male boards, nearly 20 per cent of the 60 firms on the main Hang Seng Index do not have not a single female director on their boards. In fact, at the [end of](#)

Not a single Hang Seng Index boardroom has achieved gender parity.

[2020](#), there were as many white male directors on the Index's boards as there were women directors of all backgrounds. Not a single

Hang Seng Index boardroom has achieved gender parity. More broadly, among all of Hong Kong's more than 2,500 listed companies, women hold 14.3 per cent of board seats, and nearly one-third of companies have all-male boards.

Boosting female workforce participation and increasing the number of women in leadership positions, including addressing part-time and flexible work options, caregiving responsibilities, board diversity, age discrimination, the gender pay gap, and women's health taboos would all strengthen our

city and community. There is no question that women face professional hurdles beyond the boardroom, at every level of the professional hierarchy and throughout their careers. For example, in August 2018, a [Hong Kong Equal Opportunities Commission study](#) found that less than 50 per cent of firms in Hong Kong would hire women with children.

In my industry, investment management, a 2018 study by Bella Private Markets found that female-owned hedge funds capture only 1.5 per cent of the overall assets allocated to hedge funds. While efforts have been made in the industry, especially in recruitment, getting more women into senior roles, keeping them there, and making them more visible as role models for the next generation all remain challenges for the industry, just like for our investee companies.

However, by focusing on gender diversity on boards, we have something that is tracked and measurable. It is something actionable and something we can play a role in changing.

Breaking the glass ceiling in Hong Kong

I co-founded the Hong Kong Board Diversity Investors' Initiative in 2018 when it became clear that gender diversity on Hong Kong boards was not improving on its own and likely would not improve

There is a perception that what is "good" for the markets will eventually happen – it did not happen here.

unless additional steps were taken. There is a perception that what is "good" for the markets will eventually happen – it did not happen here. We have seen in Hong Kong that

without strong incentives and the engagement of all kinds of stakeholders – including government bodies, the exchange and its regulator, corporates, NGOs, industry groups and investors - we will not achieve significant improvement.

In my company, where we have focused on engaging with companies on corporate governance, I had seen firsthand that investors, through engagement and dialogue, can create positive change at their investee companies. My co-founders and I wanted to act to leverage our role as institutional investors to apply pressure to improve board diversity.

Today, we have been joined by money managers, asset managers, pension funds and hedge funds in this effort. Our common aim is to build a constructive relationship with boards and management teams to foster a greater awareness and acceptance of the business value of diversity, reflected in greater diversity on boards and at companies over time.

Hong Kong's challenges for improving diversity are compounded by corporate ownership structures, with shareholdings frequently dominated by state-owned enterprises and controlling families. Many listed companies are closely held by founding patriarchs and tycoons, with boards comprised of immediate family members and relatives. For some of these corporates, ideal board candidates are those who share existing connections and value most of all the interests of the controlling shareholders. The basic idea behind the Board Diversity Hong Kong Investor Initiative is that investors – minority shareholders – can contribute to improving diversity by engaging with their investee companies and holding them accountable. By asking our investee companies about their board composition, diversity policies, and director nomination processes, we believe we can impact outcomes.

Within our investor group, we provide a forum for members to share information about engagements with investee companies (on a voluntary basis), and to engage with each other through dialogue and questions. We share case studies and discuss policies on proxy voting for annual meetings, with an increasing number of members adopting policies to vote against management due to diversity shortcomings. Helpfully, the massive and growing global focus on environmental, social and governance management is becoming more mainstream in Asia. Even if Hong Kong's gender diversity on boards is improving at the pace of a snail, it is harder and harder for companies to not address Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) issues. Diversity being a matter of both "S" and "G", we are seeing more international and local institutional investor sentiment evolving towards the active support of board gender diversity.

But conversations with companies about improving diversity are not always easy, and they take time and effort, especially with the companies that our signatories prioritise for engagement: the companies that have historically had all-male boards.

These companies often feel that adding a woman to their board can be seen as a high risk. When these companies finally hear the need for greater diversity, they typically set the bar very high for any female candidate. They look to find a female director candidate to single-handedly fill all of the existing skills gaps on the current board, who will, at the same time, have a great network and broad recognition. When they struggle to identify such a candidate, they inevitably report that the talent pool for female director candidates does not exist, or that they have conducted an extensive and thorough search, but were unable to identify anyone suitable.

The 30% Club Hong Kong Chapter, a supporter of the Board Diversity Hong Kong Investor Initiative, has tackled the pipeline issue head-on through its “Women to Watch” initiative. The program aims to build the pipeline of women leaders for board roles, connecting highly-qualified women to the right people and positions, and providing the necessary skills for the transition to the boardroom. Yet, it is clear that many corporates still view improving diversity as a “nice to have”, not a “need to have”.

The path ahead in Asia

The growing global trend towards improving ESG and the rise of social movements focusing on gender and racial diversity and equity have brought these issues into clearer focus over recent years, and we have seen some global progress.

In Asia, this has not been sufficient to drive significant change in gender diversity on its own. Policymakers have used incentives in the region. They include: quotas and mandatory minimums in India, requiring all listed companies to have one female independent director by April 2020; Korean rules requiring all large listed companies to have at least one female director from August 2022; hard targets in Australia, encouraging a minimum 30 per cent

for ASX300 companies; Malaysia's encouragement of a 30 per cent minimum target for “large companies” in 2017 which was extended to all listed companies in April 2021; and Singapore's Council for Board Diversity setting a 30 per cent target in 2019.

Hong Kong and Japan have historically relied on “soft” measures over the last decade. For instance, in 2019, Hong Kong's stock exchange required IPO applicants with all-male boards to explain their policies and planned measures to achieve gender diversity on the board after listing. But if we rely only on encouraging new listing candidates to have one female director, it would take Hong Kong around 2,400 years to achieve 30 per cent women on boards for all the 2,500 plus listed companies!

But after slow progress, Hong Kong may be on the brink of a massive change. In April 2021, the Hong Kong Exchange (HKEx) issued a new Consultation Paper on the Review of the Corporate Governance Code and Related Listing Rules, that included a question focusing on diversity and the potential end of single-gender (i.e. all-male) boardrooms. The proposed changes would result in an HKEx ban on single-gender boards. Hong Kong's listed companies would then have a three-year grace period and IPOs would “not be expected to have single-gender boards,” effectively creating a quota of one. The impact of this change is sweeping: between Hong Kong's existing listed companies and the IPO pipeline, it means hundreds of board seats will be opening for highly-qualified women.

As investors, we will continue to play our part to help our investee companies prepare for that change. We will advocate for internal pipelines, real independent directors' appointments, transparent nomination policies, and sometimes even propose board candidates in our engagements. We believe that every stakeholder can play a role.

Nasrine Ghazali is Chief Risk Officer at Oasis Management and Co-founder of the Board Diversity Hong Kong Investors' Initiative.

The Costs of Caring: Gender Inequalities in the Pacific Labour Scheme



Pacific labour mobility schemes are an important source of labour for rural and regional Australia and have created new economic opportunities for migrant workers and their families in Pacific Island countries.

Recent policy shifts have sought to promote increased female participation in line with government commitments to gender equality and women's economic empowerment.

While some progress has been made in improving the gender balance of employment, evidence suggests the social costs of migration – both in Australia and at home – remain disproportionately borne by women and girls.

This essay examines the gendered implications of recent policy shifts that have positioned the Pacific at the heart of Australia's temporary labour migration system. While efforts to promote women's labour force participation within the expanding scope and volume of labour mobility are laudable, the visa parameters of the recently introduced Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) entail extended periods of transnational family separation that ingrain gender disparities in the performance of unpaid care work and associated constraints on wellbeing. These social costs sit outside typical cost-benefit analyses of migration outcomes, which rely on easily quantified income metrics, and have remained largely unaddressed as a source of gender inequality.

Increasing participation, extending separation

Australia's relationship with the Pacific has become a major focus of foreign and development policy. Amid brewing geopolitical tension with China, temporary labour migration was made the central plank of a Pacific Step-Up agenda intended to strengthen economic and political ties with the region. In 2018, against this backdrop, the longstanding Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) was joined with the introduction of the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS), with both schemes reframed as 'mutually-beneficial' development initiatives rather than labour supply arrangements.

The schemes share certain characteristics: both involve non-transferrable employer-sponsored visas that allow individual workers from nine Pacific Island countries (Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu) and Timor-Leste to perform 'low-skilled' and 'semi-skilled' jobs in rural and regional Australia, subject to labour market testing. They also have important differences. Foremost among these are the duration and sectoral scope of employment. Whereas the SWP entails seasonal work of up to nine months in agriculture and horticulture, the PLS is a multi-year scheme offering up to four years of employment across a broader range of industries and occupations. Initially, the PLS was curtailed to hospitality and tourism, aged care and non-seasonal agriculture. Limited demand from employers and low recruitment

figures created pressure to broaden the scheme and sectoral restrictions were soon removed.

By early 2020, the meat processing industry – which has long struggled to attract and retain workers at going wage rates – had emerged as the largest category of approved employers, accounting for approximately 65 per cent of workers employed in the scheme. COVID-19 temporarily halted PLS recruitment, but also exposed rural Australia's systemic dependency on temporary migrant labour. In November 2020, exceptions to Australia's strict border closure were made to allow for the resumption of Pacific labour mobility to address burgeoning employer demand in lieu of other migrant arrivals. Following the 'restart', almost all PLS arrivals have been employed in meat processing or agriculture.

The preliminary focus on service sector occupations within the design of the PLS was, in large part, an effort to create jobs that align with the social construction of "women's work" in response to a clear and persistent gender imbalance in SWP participation. Since its inception in 2012, men have

Men have typically accounted for 85 per cent or more of all SWP placements – reflecting a confluence of gender norms, safety concerns and employer preference.

typically accounted for 85 per cent or more of all SWP placements — reflecting a confluence of gender norms, safety concerns and employer preference. Seasonal agricultural work often involves physically demanding or dangerous labour that is often performed by men in the countries of origin; it frequently takes

place in remote locations, involving accommodation that might be deemed culturally inappropriate for women; and, given limited demand in Australia, can create large labour pools in which recruitment is subject to complete employer discretion.

While there is modest sub-national variation in SWP gender ratios, the overall picture is one of persistent male domination of seasonal employment opportunities. Furthermore, with the Australian Government following the World Bank's lead in positioning migration and remittances as a vehicle for economic development in the Pacific, lopsided gender participation in the SWP is misaligned with aid and development policy promoting gender equality and women's economic empowerment.

The PLS therefore represented an ideal opportunity to rectify this situation, with the extended duration and scope of the scheme allowing workers to potentially earn and remit more income, for longer.

Considerable gender balance was achieved in the very early stages of the PLS; until the scheme was opened up to other industries, women made up roughly half of all participants. Even now, having reoriented toward male-dominated occupational categories, women's participation in the PLS is greater than the SWP, hovering around 20 per cent as of September 2021. It is equally likely that – in light of Australia's ongoing aged care crisis and bipartisan support for expanding Pacific labour mobility to compensate for the slow return of temporary migrant workers from other countries – there could be an imminent 'refeminisation' of the scheme. And yet, while increased female labour force participation

Policy constraints of the current visa arrangement are likely to reproduce gender inequalities in other aspects of women's lives.

in the PLS may well begin rebalancing gendered inequalities in income derived from Pacific labour mobility, policy constraints of the current visa arrangement are likely to *reproduce* gender inequalities in other aspects of women's lives.

The extended duration of the

PLS not only entails a prolonged earning opportunity, but the protraction of a situation in which workers are denied rights that the rest of us would consider inalienable: namely the freedom to maintain and create family life. PLS workers are recruited by approved employers scattered across the vastness of Australia, often in remote communities far removed from the Pacific coast. Without provisions for family accompaniment or financial means to cover potentially exorbitant international travel costs, extended transnational family separation can be inevitable — with implications for maintaining personal relationships and care responsibilities.

These restrictions impact the wellbeing of men and women alike but the weight of available evidence indicates that these social costs are not borne equally.

Gendering the social costs of temporary labour migration

The PLS is not a unique visa arrangement.

In facilitating multi-year employment in low-wage industries, without family accompaniment or the ability to change employers, it shares similar characteristics to temporary labour migration schemes that have proliferated across Asia since the 1960s. Participation in these temporary labour migration is seldom an individual pursuit, but rather a household livelihood strategy. When migration entails periods of extended separation, it not only reconfigures the way households organise work and income, but also the unpaid care activities and intimate relationships that sustain and reproduce family life. Though the PLS affords workers vastly greater regulatory oversight, legal protection and welfare support than equivalent migration channels between South Asia and the Persian Gulf, or between poorer and wealthier regions of Southeast Asia, we know that the care implications of extended transnational family separation disproportionately affect women and girls. There has been limited assessment of these social costs in the PLS, due in part to the newness of the scheme, but there are extensive insights from decades of men and women's participation in comparable temporary labour migration schemes.

Time-use data shows that, globally, women perform significantly more unpaid care work than their male counterparts, particularly across Asia and the Pacific, where women perform care work for nearly five times longer each day. The gender norms underpinning this division of labour are often reaffirmed when married men migrate, with the care activities and parental responsibilities they hitherto performed taken on by their remaining spouse and/or other women in the family. When women migrate, there is typically more care work to reorganise within the remaining household and less support for role switching between spouses. The extent of male caring within migrant households, of course, varies greatly and attitudinal change toward gendered divisions of labour can be an outcome of migration in itself. Nonetheless, feminised temporary labour migration from South and Southeast Asia commonly involves some combination of: other women picking

up the 'reproductive slack', the continuation of care responsibilities by women during migration, or the emergence of 'care deficits' where migrant households experience a net loss in care capacity. These outcomes reproduce gender inequality. The 'substitute care' of other women – often daughters or grandmothers previously *receiving care* – further ingrains a gendered division of labour in the performance of unpaid care. When women migrants continue caring from afar, they navigate a double burden of work and care that similarly preserves this disparity. Care deficits, meanwhile, make social costs intergenerational: remaining migrant children – particularly girls – can experience higher rates of health issues, sexual and physical abuse, educational disruptions and delinquency. When relationships break down and households fall apart, as they frequently do after years of separation, these social costs can become enduring impediments to wellbeing.

Though research on social costs is extremely limited, these themes appear to be playing out in the Pacific, too. While a World Bank study in Tonga and Vanuatu draws attention to the potential for women's participation in the SWP to challenge traditional gender norms surrounding work and financial decision-making, the author of the underlying research observed that these changes were partial and quickly reversed post-migration. Rather, they claim that an existing over-reliance on women's unpaid care work enables (and is reproduced through) male migration: "As more men continue to participate in seasonal work, this does not necessarily bring about changes to traditional gender roles, but rather, leads to the persistence of gender norms". When men migrated, women were expected to take on additional unpaid labour associated with subsistence agriculture that their husbands previously performed; when women joined the SWP, it was reported that men typically received help from female relatives to meet household care needs. A similar study of New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme corroborates these findings and additionally identifies negative impacts on migrant children's emotional development, care arrangements, and education. Both studies note that extramarital affairs and relationship breakdowns are commonly reported and may have particularly adverse social and financial outcomes for women.

The introduction of the four-year PLS scheme will likely exacerbate these issues. Extended periods of transnational family separation are set to compound existing tensions between women's work and care roles, while placing strain on parental and personal relationships that are maintained only through distance communication and remittances. Longitudinal studies assessing the ongoing implications of these profound transformations to family life are sorely needed, though without change to the policy parameters of the PLS there is little to suggest outcomes will be positive or gender-neutral.

Reconciling work and care through policy

As a process of social transformation, migration can and does alter the normative frameworks that shape gendered divisions of labour – but attitudinal change can be patchy, transient, and slow to take hold. There is no compelling reason to leave the resolution of gender inequitable outcomes to chance, particularly in a context where migration is being promoted as a pathway to development and women's

Female labour force participation is, by itself, a necessary but insufficient condition for gender equality

economic empowerment. As feminist scholarship has long made clear, female labour force participation is, by itself, a necessary but insufficient condition for gender equality. If Australia is serious about making

the PLS work for women, it needs to look beyond the narrow frame of participation and address the 'missing link' of unpaid care work.

While there is no quick policy fix for deep-seated gender norms shaping work and care roles across the Pacific, there is an opportunity to envision best practice principles to reconcile the work and care tensions produced by the temporary labour migration model. This necessarily begins with the recognition that social costs are economic; that work and care are two sides of the same coin. Human labour can only be put to productive ends insofar as it can be reproduced, daily and intergenerationally, and gender equality can only be achieved if balance is struck across *all* forms of work. Within the PLS, this means ensuring that participation in the scheme,

whether by women or men, is not conditional on the 'invisible' labour of other women or immiserates care resources within migrant households.

Numerous workplace and programmatic reforms could improve transnational family life in the PLS, but two policies offer a more substantial change in direction. Firstly, the visa parameters of the PLS need to be reworked to allow family accompaniment – consistent with all other temporary work visas – so that spouses can work in Australia and children can benefit from access to public education and health services. While accompaniment will not suit the needs and preferences of all migrant households, it is important that the decision is made by families and not policymakers. Secondly, and more ambitiously, Australia has an opportunity to redirect Pacific aid and development spending toward investments in care infrastructure and services that migrant communities can draw on in times of need. Recent research has shown that investing in care boosts economic growth and gender equality, allowing more women to participate in paid work as the responsibility for care provision is shifted from families to publicly funded services.

Of course, both policy options will incur significant government expenses. If the PLS is truly to be a gender-equitable development program and not simply a labour supply arrangement at Australia's convenience, there should be little qualm over funding sustainable outcomes.

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Investing in Women for the Future of Southeast Asia



Capital can empower the voices of equality and enable women to realise their potential as leaders of economic and social development and agents of change in their communities. The disruption ahead is a major shift in recognising the power of women taking charge of their futures, which will unlock significant new value.

Southeast Asia is amongst the fastest growing and most diverse regions in the world. There are significant business opportunities including in sectors where there is a demand-supply mismatch such as

healthcare and education and has yet underdeveloped capacity to leverage supply chains and technology to respond to growing demand for more sustainable choices in food and consumer products.

Women are central to realising this potential but are often left out of the equation due to a complex mix of institutional, cultural, economic, and political factors. *The available data paints a clear picture: the biggest challenge to closing the gender gap is wage and labour force participation.*

household buying power directed to food, healthcare, education, childcare, consumer durables, fitness, beauty and apparel, and financial services and represent a majority of the workforce in a number of these sectors.

Leaving no one behind is the central tenet of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their transformative promise to eradicate poverty, discrimination and exclusion. Women are half the population; the cost of leaving them behind is significant. [McKinsey Global Institute](#) estimated the economies of Southeast Asia could boost collective gross domestic product (GDP) by US\$370 billion a year by 2025 by eliminating gender inequity. That is equivalent to Singapore's 2019 GDP.

Realising that benefit will require changes in key areas including women's labour-force participation, the proportion of paid work for women, and more roles for women in higher-productivity sectors. Investment is a powerful tool for mobilising activity and achieving change. Targeting scalable solutions that drive value through diversity and inclusion requires a fresh approach.

[Sasakawa Peace Foundation research](#) found that women's entrepreneurship is key to economic stability, GDP growth, sustainable development, and is key to innovation and business strength. However, access to capital remains stubbornly low.

This aligns with our experience. Our investment thesis is that bringing these factors into focus is good investment, good for women and good for society.

We have learned that focusing solely on investing in women entrepreneurs is necessary but not sufficient. Our diversity-driven strategies go broader to include

companies led by women; companies operating in sectors with a high prevalence of women employees; companies providing products and services that meet the unmet needs and wants of women and girls; and companies operating as role models by demonstrating a clear commitment to gender equality and to equitable workplaces that centre diversity, flexibility and providing quality jobs and working environment for women and other under-represented groups.

We actively look for opportunities where impact is integral to the business model and diversity and gender equality are essential to the enterprise's leadership, operations and value chains. We work actively with our portfolio enterprises to embed diversity measures alongside financial and other business goals as a performance driver.

Enabling women leaders – providing entrepreneurs with capital and support

Approximately a quarter of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are owned by women entrepreneurs in Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines. [Fostering Women's Entrepreneurship in ASEAN](#), a United Nations report, finds that across Thailand, the Philippines and Malaysia women entrepreneurs hired 17 per cent more women than male counterparts, and women use their incomes differently, spending 90 cents of every dollar they earn on their families, including on their children's education, health and nutrition compared to 30-40 cents devoted by men, creating a strong multiplier effect.

Increasingly more businesses are being founded by women in the region and more new businesses are founded by women than men. In some countries, high rates of informal work result in women becoming entrepreneurs: for example, the World Bank Gender Portal for Indonesia indicates rates of informal work in excess of 68 per cent result in a large number of 'necessity entrepreneurs'. Overall, 60 per cent, or 33 million, micro, small and medium enterprises in Indonesia were led by women in 2015.

We also see positive trends in women entrepreneurs re-imagining solutions to address systemic underinvestment in key sectors. In health care,

for example, we have identified high potential women-led enterprises in biotechnology, telehealth, medical devices, and diagnostic medicine, as well as medical infrastructure. An example is women-led hospitals addressing community family health needs against a backdrop across the region of limited access, chronic overcrowding, and lack of skilled healthcare workers.

Whether starting a business responsive to need or opportunity, our experience is these entrepreneurs need access to capital to grow their businesses. International Finance Corporation data indicates US\$900 billion to US\$1.1 trillion of SMEs' capital requirements are unmet in East Asia, with a disproportionate impact on women entrepreneurs. On average, only 5 to 6 per cent of micro-enterprises, 12 to 15 per cent of small firms, and 17 to 21 per cent of medium enterprises led by women have access to appropriate capital.

Companies with women in key roles drive change

Sectors where women are a significant proportion of the workforce provide a focal point for improving women's employment opportunities. We look to

Companies focused on improving areas such as skills development, pay equity, supportive work environments as well as labour and social protection have an important competitive advantage.

dimensions of skills development, pay equity, supportive policies and work environments as well as labour and social protection. Our experience is that companies focused on improving areas such as skills development, pay equity, supportive work environments, as well as labour and social

protection, have an important competitive advantage. This includes access to a wider talent pool, enhanced productivity, and improved staff retention.

Overall, better jobs for women lead to higher income levels and more decision-making influence. An example of a company Sweef Capital has supported is an accounting services provider in the Philippines

with a management team comprised mostly of women that has instituted a continuous learning environment for skills development and feedback mechanisms to ensure high rates of retention as well as business continuity for its clients.

Focusing on women's employment also influences life outside the workplace. Women play multiple roles in society: breadwinner, homemaker, primary carer for children and elderly, overseeing children's education. This has been a factor in workforce participation in Indonesia and the Philippines. Women's workforce participation in the Philippines reached an all-time low of 46 per cent in 2018. In Indonesia, only 54 per cent of working-age women are active in the workforce compared to 82 per cent of working-age men. Vietnam leads the way with more than 72 per cent of women in the workforce, above global averages of 50 per cent.

Gender norms have influenced the type of employment, experience in the workplace and opportunities for development and advancement for women. For instance, women and girls have systematically tracked away from science, technology, engineering and maths, limiting their training and options to go into these fields as professionals. In the health sector where there are high rates of women's participation, there remains gender-based discrimination in earnings, barriers to full-time employment and access to professional development and leadership roles.

These constraints are also opportunities. What we see on the ground reinforces opportunities to mobilise more women into the workforce, move more women from transient and piece work to stable jobs and incomes, opportunities to develop talent and pathways for advancement and invest in relevant care economy solutions and opportunities to enable a more sustainable facilitating environment to thrive. Our approach supports enterprise partners to identify and harness these opportunities in workforce attraction, development and leadership capability to support business growth.

Growth potential in products that meet the needs of women and girls

Sweef Capital sees many women entrepreneurs starting their businesses in response to a perceived need based on their personal experiences. They set out to create the food products, health services or educational options they could not access in the market. These leaders are representative of investment opportunities in businesses focusing on promoting gender equality and/or delivering products or services relating to women's health, labour-saving technologies or devices, or learning tools to improve the skills and capabilities of women.

In the Philippines, known as a top outsourcing location, enterprises have been founded by women to train and place women in jobs as virtual assistants serving local and international customers. This addresses the time poverty women experience from two perspectives: firstly as a valuable resource for women running their own businesses and secondly as an opportunity for women seeking flexible jobs.

These enterprises have a target market growing in decision-making power and influence. By 2028, Nielson [research](#) suggests women are projected to own 75 per cent of discretionary consumer spending, making them the world's greatest influencers. Young women and girls represent a large, growing and relatively untapped market with significant upside potential. Investing in them gives them the opportunity to reach their full potential and make vibrant local economies possible, as future customers and decision-makers, as influencers, as employees and suppliers, and as employers and ambassadors.

Building gender and diversity role models in business and investment

There is evidence that companies that commit to both strong internal gender equality efforts and continuous operational improvements are superior business performers. McKinsey's [research](#) indicates that "more diverse companies are better able to [attract top talent](#); to [improve their customer orientation](#), employee satisfaction, and [decision making](#); and to secure their license to operate". Other research has highlighted benefits of diversity ranging from 63 per cent better

financial performance of enterprises with all woman teams, 35 per cent higher return on investment and 12 per cent higher revenue growth for women-led venture backed companies to higher profitability of businesses with 30 per cent or more women executives and heightened collective intelligence of groups including women.

Sweef Capital's experience suggests that companies can build competitive advantage by adopting policies and practices that support gender diversity throughout the human resources cycle from recruitment and promotion to talent retention and workplace culture. Our impact thesis (Gender ROI™) is that embedding and improving gender equality at the enterprise level will: improve the way an enterprise is led and operated to drive value creation; build value through its value chain; and improve outcomes material to women's economic empowerment and well-being across intersecting domains of resilience, opportunity and inclusion. The Gender ROI™ is a structured framework of key gender data points, to test, track and course correct the direct progress towards gender equality for our investments.

We hold ourselves to the same standard. That puts Sweef Capital at the forefront in changing the narrative on the lack of diversity in private equity and the wider industry; in aggregate, women make up only 11 per cent of senior PE/VC investment professionals in emerging markets. This is despite data that indicates companies with gender-balanced teams deliver up to 20 per cent higher returns, and women partners invested in almost double the number of women-owned companies as their male partners.

The way forward

Driving more private capital into gender lens investing and building on the examples of success and lessons learned will help create a track record and encourage increasing investment. Building the evidence base on the links between diversity and performance and value creation and embedding clear comparable data will inform practice and decision-making. Further examining the role that equity can play versus credit as well

as the role government institutions can play in blended finance solutions that can act as a mechanism to mobilise private sector investment, including the public sector's role in providing technical assistance solutions.

A commitment to action starts with being informed.

A commitment to action starts with being informed. Organisations can engage with the tools, frameworks and data available ranging from United Nations agencies and Oxfam frameworks on women's economic empowerment to specialist thought leadership on gender-smart approaches from [Criterion Institute](#) and GenderSmart and the expert and practitioner forums they convene. [GenderSmart](#) is dedicated to unlocking the deployment of strategic, impactful gender-focused capital at scale. This includes translating gender finance highlights across asset classes, geographies and strategies, convening and connecting investment allocators and influencers, and enhancing the collective field capacity.

All organisations can look at their own performance on diversity and gender equality. Those who see the opportunity from being more proactive will apply these tools and become more fluent in diversity levers and data. Development and multi-lateral organisations are leading the [2X Collaborative](#) and [2X Ignite](#) programmes to increase the number and quality of gender smart fund managers and products in emerging markets. [2X Collaborative](#) is an industry body for gender lens investing representing an opportunity for capital providers to engage in peer learning, develop standards and tools, and co-invest with a gender lens.

The centrality of gender is being reflected in sustainability and reporting standards which are explicitly making gender a cross-cutting requirement for achieving sustainability targets including the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and as a critical factor in climate impacts. For example, the SDG Impact Standards set a best practice benchmark and require private equity, bonds and enterprises to demonstrate how they are managing gender, climate and labour practices irrespective of their industry or impact focus.

The changes are flowing through to private investment markets. The [Asset Owner Diversity Charter](#) led out of the United Kingdom already has 17 asset owners representing US\$1.5 trillion in assets under management signed up to incorporate diversity questions into manager selection and other processes and monitoring progress. These types of initiatives will create and signal demand and mobilise others more quickly.

We encourage more organisations to join us in making a commitment to diversity and gender inclusion as an integral part of their investment approach in a structured and disciplined way and cultivating a culture and investment philosophy that values the impacts created for women as leaders, in the workforce, through value chains and in our society.

Jennifer Buckley is Founder, Rowena Reyes is a Director and Rosemary Addis is Chair of the Board of Advisors at Sweef Capital

From Investment Banking to Ethical Fashion



An interview with Sasibai Kimis

“It took a long while for us to build consumer awareness about slow fashion, appreciating hand craftsmanship versus mass fashion products, and to think about the well-being of the people behind the products.”

Q: Why did you decide to create a social enterprise and what issues are you trying to solve?

While I was growing up in Malaysia, we used to go to India over the school breaks to visit my maternal grandma and relatives. One particular time,

when I was around eight, my father brought my family to the village where his family was from. I remember holding his hands and walking through the village. I recall an old, bent-over lady with little clothes on, who asked my dad for money. He handed her what he had...

we were surrounded in a circle by villagers, that moment struck me... and the life I have in Malaysia, even if I thought we had a simple life, was far more luxurious than what many around the world have access to.

When I was 16, I visited my grand-uncle in Tamil Nadu in India. He had worked in Malaysia for most of his life to support his family and had returned to India in his old age. We found out that his wife and son had refused to care for him even after he had worked his

Money alone is not the solution, you need people who are going to execute solutions to make a difference.

whole life to support them. He was said to be living with his daughter. But when we went to his daughter's home, I saw a beggar lying down outside, dogs and flies around him. We walked in and asked where my grand-

uncle was. She said: "Oh, he's outside". She pointed to the old man lying in the dirt. When I saw him, I got down on my knees and almost wanted to cry. We brought him to the hospital. Two weeks later he died. It was at this point in my life that I told myself that I want to find a way to help the needy and marginalised.

Q: So, how did you make the leap from the finance world to Earth Heir?

While I was studying at the University of Pennsylvania I thought if I earned a lot of money, I could donate that money to those who need it. But once I was working at Lehman Brothers in New York, I quickly grew disillusioned, I felt like I was helping companies get richer, while the world's needy were not being considered. I also realised that money alone is not the solution, you need people who are going to execute solutions to make a difference.

Following a Master's in Development in 2001, I returned to Malaysia for two years to work with our family railway engineering firm. I tried getting a job in development with NGOs, the UN, etc. after graduating, but it was harder to get a job with an NGO in Africa than it was to get an investment banking job! I then had the opportunity to do an internship with the UNDP in Ghana in 2004.

This time in Ghana was a time of great learning for me, being on the ground, realising I don't need much to live on, working with the UN, with NGOs, learning about how development agencies work, the challenges

on the ground, how to build appropriate solutions. Working with an NGO which depended on donor funding, we had to curtail some of our life saving work due to the lack of funds. This was also when I realised that for impact to be sustainable, building revenue is key.

I returned to Malaysia and started with the sovereign wealth fund Khazanah Nasional in 2009. In 2011, I had a bit of a wake-up call after a near car accident returning from work. At that point, I wondered about what I am living my life for, if I was to die today?

So, I quit my job and took time off in Hawaii for three months to learn more about my faith and natural farming, and went to Cambodia to teach English and build schools. It was during this time that I met with mothers who lost their children to sex traffickers and weavers who couldn't earn enough to make a living. I felt that I have been blessed with a loving family, a good education and opportunities. I should share that and give back to others.

In 2012, it started as a simple gesture to help. I bought scarves from the women I met and sold them to friends and family. In early 2013, I met Dr. Kim Tan, a social impact investor, who said if I wanted to make a difference in these women's lives I needed to help them move from the informal to the formal economy. I was scared! I had never started a business before — studying at a business school doesn't necessarily prepare you to be an entrepreneur! But driven by my desire to make a difference and the entrepreneurship example of my own father, I decided to start Earth Heir. We officially registered the company on 14 February 2013.

Q: What keeps you going?

My Christian faith has been a significant guidance in my life, together with the example of my father. He grew up in poverty and raised our whole family, through sacrifice and entrepreneurship.

My personal mission statement is to inspire and encourage human consciousness to creatively practice sustainable ideas which respect and work with God's creation as a treasured heritage. It has been very helpful in guiding what I spend my energies on. Before Earth Heir, I went through so many ideas and even now, when there are money-making opportunities that don't align with my values and personal mission statement, I say no.

Founding and running Earth Heir has been a marrying of my interests in business and social justice. Even in the worst of times while running it,

But to be honest, it would be good to move away from a gender lens of leadership. A good leader is a good leader.

I was driven by my personal mission, seeing the impact of our work on communities and raising awareness of ethical supply chains and conscious consumption. It took a long while for us to build consumer awareness about slow fashion,

appreciating hand craftsmanship versus mass fashion products, and to think about the well-being of the people behind the products. It has been, and is, a tough road. Awareness of ethical fashion, conscious consumption is low and not many ask questions about how, where, who, what makes a product. I used to buy cheap basics from places like Primark and Walmart, but since Earth Heir, I make an effort to think about the materials, processes and people behind the product before I purchase anything. The textile industry is the second-most most polluting industry in the world — that surprised me. So the choices we make have consequences.

When I look back at the 10 years since I left my corporate job, there are some days when I think, why am I doing this? Why take this difficult path? But each time I look at the successes and what we have managed to build, I know we are leaving a legacy for a nation and for generations.

Q: While female entrepreneurship is increasing, gender norms are still challenging women's participation in business worldwide. What have been the biggest barriers to building your own business?

Earth Heir is owned by four Malaysian women. When it started, I wanted to make sure the business model worked, and that the company survived on its own revenue. So, we have chosen to not raise any external funding to date. However, one of the barriers I have seen, was that the fund-raising space is very dominated by a “bro culture” of sorts. I've seen millions put into tech startups that didn't go anywhere and had very little positive impact in the world, and I wished more of that money was put into

more social enterprises transforming lives. I also feel that childcare should be a basic benefit for all women and men. Some of the most significant barriers in building Earth Heir were self-inflicted, to be honest. I was too proud to ask friends and family for help. Slowly I realised that if people don't know what you need help with, because you don't have the humility to ask, you will never get the help you need. Humility is one of the greatest lessons I have learned as an entrepreneur.

Q: Women are the majority of workers in the global supply chains but among the most vulnerable.

In your experience, what is the trickle-down effect of empowering marginalised groups in the Asian supply chain?

Throughout the world, women remain in charge of family and household management and expenses. When I did my Master's thesis research at the border of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka in India, women who

Don't wait to be seen in the workplace, speak and ask.

were empowered with the ability to earn an income made positive choices for the family as a whole.

At Earth Heir, almost 90 per cent of the skilled artisans we work with are women, and quite a number are sole wage earners for their families. I've seen our artisans pay for their children's university education, feed their families, pay for healthcare through improved livelihoods — knowing our work can have this kind of impact is what motivates all of us at Earth Heir to do what we do.

Q: Can you be successful and grassroots?

This is definitely a challenge. The very nature of our work means that we are very grassroots, production is decentralised, artisans work from home (and we encourage them to so that they can care for their families) and because we focus on hand craftsmanship, we don't mass produce. The beauty of each piece made by hand is that it carries the cultural, personal and historical narratives of the person who makes them. My definition of success has changed in the last 10 years; it is about the quality of impact we have in the lives of those around us and the quality of our own lives.

Q: You have worked across Asia and the United States. How do you assess women's ability to access the workforce and education in very different cultures across Asia?

I've not lived in many countries in Asia, but as an example, I feel that Singapore has a system in place which allows for greater mobility of women, irrespective of race, creed etc. However, in comparison, Singapore also has a very controlled environment, whereas the organic nature of life in India and Malaysia allows for greater creativity and innovation to take place.

Q: Almost half the world's social entrepreneurs are female. This is strikingly more gender-balanced than other types of leadership. Why do you think that is?

I actually thought it would be higher than that! I cannot speak for the rest of the world, but in Malaysia, it does seem like there are more female social entrepreneurs. This question does make one want to reach out for gender characteristics of women as more nurturing and empathetic, hence there are likely a greater proportion of female leaders in the SE space. But to be honest, it would be good to move away from a gender lens of leadership. A good leader is a good leader. Perhaps there are more female leaders in the SE space because it is not considered as 'sexy' or with the same potential to make huge sums of money as other sectors.

Q: Before starting your social enterprise, you had a successful career in the finance industry. What was it like being a woman in such a male-dominated industry?

My first job was actually at Lehman Brothers in New York, I was one of the few minority, non-American analysts in the investment banking group. However, it was also one of the jobs where I did not feel discrimination because of my gender, race or culture. My colleagues and my supervisors gave me equal opportunity, and I was taken to the highest levels of meetings and events, and was never made to feel like I was a lowly analyst. But what was difficult for me was the lifestyle of the job and how I struggled to find meaning in what we were doing.

Q: What's a leadership lesson that's unique to being a female leader? How are women redefining what it means to be a top executive?

I am not a fan of defining leaders by gender. At Earth Heir, I have tried to create a workplace that is respectful, considers the personal lives of our team members, not based on face time, and has a good work-life balance. One thing I will say is that having women leaders in positions of influence is a huge encouragement for other women. I recall reading a study about how there were not enough female engineering students at a university in the US. A female dean was elected and she hired more female engineering professors and the number of female engineering enrolments increased hugely. So, there is much need and space for women and men in leadership to create space for other women and mentor younger female leaders.

Q: What is one thing you know now about women and work you wish you had known earlier in your career?

Women need to speak up more and ask for what they need and deserve! Don't wait to be seen in the workplace — speak and ask.

Q: What advice would you give to the next generation of Asian female leaders?

Take time to travel, even within your local area, expose yourself to people of from different circumstances, places and events which are outside of your sphere of current knowledge. This will help you be a better leader and think more creatively and innovatively to solve problems.

Sasibai Kimis is Founder and Chief Innovation Officer at Earth Heir.



Pandemic Recovery Can Transform Gender Norms in the Region



The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to Asian economies and societies — with women and girls at the crossroads.

While progress on key economic and social areas has been stalled, if not reversed, the region is presented with a critical window of opportunity to take advantage of regional recovery efforts and the push for building back better to reconsider how to accelerate gender equality through social norm approaches.

Gender equality in Asia and the Pacific has not been immune to the devastating disruptions unleashed by

the COVID-19 pandemic across all aspects of everyday life. While the region saw remarkable progress across a range of gender indicators over recent decades, the pandemic has exposed its gender fault lines and vulnerabilities. How the region's governments, the private sector, and development partners respond to these gendered impacts will be crucial in limiting the scale of disruption to women and girls.

COVID-19 disrupting gender gains and progress

Unlike earlier pandemics or crises, COVID-19 has had disproportionately higher negative socio-economic outcomes for women than for men. These include high job losses for women, further increases in the already high unpaid care burdens for women, and increased rates of gender-based violence, in particular intimate partner violence. In respect to employment, Asia and the Pacific was already the only global region with declining female labour force participation and the pandemic has only worsened this trend. Women experienced relatively higher job losses because of their concentration in vulnerable occupations in hard-hit sectors, such as retail and hospitality. Women-owned businesses have also been negatively affected; over three-quarters of surveyed women-owned businesses in Mongolia reported a significant decline in revenue and concern for business survival, according to the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Unpaid care work has increased because of lockdown measures, including school closures, with the burden falling more heavily on women; rapid assessments by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment undertaken last year indicate increases for both sexes but more pronounced for women, in a context where women in the region were already performing four times more unpaid care work than men. Rates of reported intimate-partner violence have also increased. Across the region, the United Nations Development Program has reported that domestic violence hotline call volumes have increased from 33 per cent pre-pandemic to 50 per cent. Given the typically high levels of underreporting of gender-based violence, this is likely to be the tip of the iceberg of a more profoundly troubling “shadow pandemic”.

A silver lining of the pandemic?

These reversals of hard-won gender gains and deterioration of key areas of women's livelihoods and wellbeing have not gone unnoticed by policymakers in the region. International and regional development actors have called for plans to “build back better” twinned with messages about a future development

model that will involve more inclusive and transformative approaches. While it is difficult to find a silver lining in the pandemic, there is an opportunity for gender equality advocates, policymakers, and development agencies such as the ADB to step up to more meaningfully integrate gender equality into the region's economic recovery.

The pandemic has highlighted that economic growth and dynamism in Asia have not eliminated the systemic gender inequalities that pervade the region's economies and social institutions.

If anything, the pandemic has highlighted that economic growth and dynamism in Asia have not eliminated the systemic gender inequalities that pervade the region's economies and social institutions. More women than ever are in the labour market and there have been reductions in

gender gaps in education, as well as in key health indicators (notably life expectancy and maternal mortality). But despite these milestones in Asia's gender story, social norms and expectations about women's status within these societies and economies still predominantly hinge on their reproductive roles as mothers and caregivers. Social norms are an important factor behind the gender segregation of the labour market and education pathways, with women concentrated in feminised professions, which are also typically less valued and paid, and vulnerable. It is quite telling, for example, that the Philippines, where GDP growth pre-pandemic was among the highest in Southeast Asia, also had the highest share of adolescent pregnancy in the subregion, and a majority of people not in education, employment or training who were overwhelmingly female.

For these reasons, pursuing a transformative gender agenda could not only counteract the pandemic's adverse gender impacts but also serve as a positive disruption to the business-as-usual approach to gender equality. A transformative gender agenda refers to approaches that directly tackle the discriminatory social norms that underpin and drive gender inequalities in development outcomes. Sustainable Development Goal 5 targets these social norm issues, which include, among other things, unpaid care work, gender-based violence,

women's participation in decision-making and leadership, and access to productive resources (including land and assets). While there is growing evidence of the correlations between discriminatory social norms on development outcomes, such transformative approaches have been deprioritized in current recovery discussions in favour of short-term, gender-neutral solutions. For example, COVID-19 policy responses have largely neglected to account for unpaid care work, despite evidence correlating levels of women's unpaid care work with female labour force participation.

What would a gender transformative COVID-19 recovery look like?

An important first step would be to incorporate gender targets in COVID-19 recovery and stimulus programs that take into account the systematic inequalities inherent in pre-pandemic Asian economies. This was an approach adopted by the ADB in its COVID-19 response and support to developing member countries: all 26 approved COVID-19 response programs included gender targets aiming to strengthen women's financial resilience and vulnerability to poverty. For example, in Indonesia the focus of the support under the program was the expansion of social assistance programs for poor and vulnerable households, with the Family Hope Program expanded from 9.2 million to 10 million, reaching at least 90 per cent women beneficiaries and the *Kartu Sembako* food assistance program targeting 96 per cent of women and 16 per cent female-headed households. The program also provides a six-month income tax relief to manufacturing workers with annual incomes less than US\$14,000, with at least 75 per cent of female manufacturing workers qualifying for the relief.

ADB has also applied this gender lens in its investments and support to the private sector. As part of a COVID-19 Emergency Bridging Facility, it supported Fiji Airways to adopt gender targets which included increasing the number of women in technical and management positions, as well as training female cadets for the first time in its new Fiji Aviation Academy. The Bank will also be supporting a more gender-friendly workplace environment policy

through the development and implementation of a gender inclusion policy and a family violence policy.

Secondly, gender transformative recovery and stimulus programs and policies would include budgetary and policy prioritization to address key social norm areas. For example, increasing budget support to grassroots organisations tackling gender-based violence was included across several ADB COVID-19 budget support programs in the Pacific. Expanding affordable, accessible and quality childcare services have also finally been recognized by policymakers as an essential policy priority for enabling women's access to decent work. In the developed economies of Australia, Canada and the United States, for example, the childcare sector saw unprecedented levels of attention and resources in national budgets in 2021. A thematic set aside focusing on social norms was also established for the Asian Development Fund 13 in 2019, which aims to encourage the integration of transformative gender approaches into investments in lower-income economies. This year, close to US\$40 million has been allocated to wide-ranging transformative gender projects that also respond to the COVID-19 pandemic's impacts on women and girls in the region.

Thirdly, a gender transformative recovery would see stronger investments in building women's resilience to natural disasters and climate change. Women and girls in developing countries are disproportionately vulnerable to the impact of climate change and disasters including in terms of mortality, morbidity, and economic shocks. Women are rarely in a position of power or influence at the household or community level to significantly contribute to the decisions concerning what measures they need to put in place to mitigate against the impacts, and what services and/or support they require to return to normalcy.

As countries shift away from fossil fuels, pursue policy transition towards net-zero carbon emissions, and build resilience to climate change, there is an unprecedented opportunity to create a new paradigm for women's economic empowerment through the creation of quality jobs for women. This will require targeted investment in science, technology, engineering and maths education for women and girls, including technical and vocational training,

to prepare them with the necessary skills for jobs in the growing renewable energy sectors.

ADB, through a Strengthening Women's Resilience to Climate Change and Disaster Risk in Asia and the Pacific technical assistance project, partnered with Habitat for Humanity Fiji to provide women with carpentry skills to build disaster-resilient homes. This has enabled them to contribute and make decisions around shelter preparedness in their communities, as well as to access employment opportunities within a historically male-dominated construction industry.

Finally, the gender transformation of Asian economies will require harnessing the potential of disruptive technologies to disrupt gender inequalities. There are

Development partners and regional governments cannot expect pandemic recovery to bring about gender equality without targeted and transformative approaches.

some relatively easy wins that would bring significant returns. For example, a recent International Finance Corporation report estimates that reducing the gender earnings gap in ecommerce in Southeast Asia could bring an additional US\$280 billion to the regional value of online commerce. In the

Philippines, ADB supported the development and rollout of a cloud-based banking app which aimed to contribute to financial inclusion, including of unbanked women in remote rural communities. Such easy wins, however, need to be complemented by longer-term strategies to address the gender digital divide and build women's digital skills to compete in a rapidly evolving digital economy.

Learning from the disruption for future development policy

Development partners like ADB and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade can play an important role in enabling such positive disruptions for gender equality in developing Asia by setting gender transformative priorities in our investments and support. One takeaway from COVID-19 is that promoting transformative gender approaches should

not be limited to traditional sectors such as health or education. A transformative gender recovery will

A gender-transformative recovery will need a whole-of-economy response.

need to look at all aspects of Asian economies and directly tackle the stubborn discriminatory social norms that have maintained glass ceilings and gender gaps despite the region's pre-

pandemic growth. Just as pre-pandemic GDP growth was not able to eliminate gender gaps, development partners and regional governments cannot expect pandemic recovery to bring about gender equality without targeted and transformative approaches.

It is important to note that the journey to a gender transformative recovery is a shared one across developed and developing Asia. There will be valuable lessons learned for low-middle- and high-income economies grappling with the emerging and exacerbated gender challenges brought on by the pandemic. Already, some important lessons can be gleaned on how to leverage disruptions in favour of women and girls:

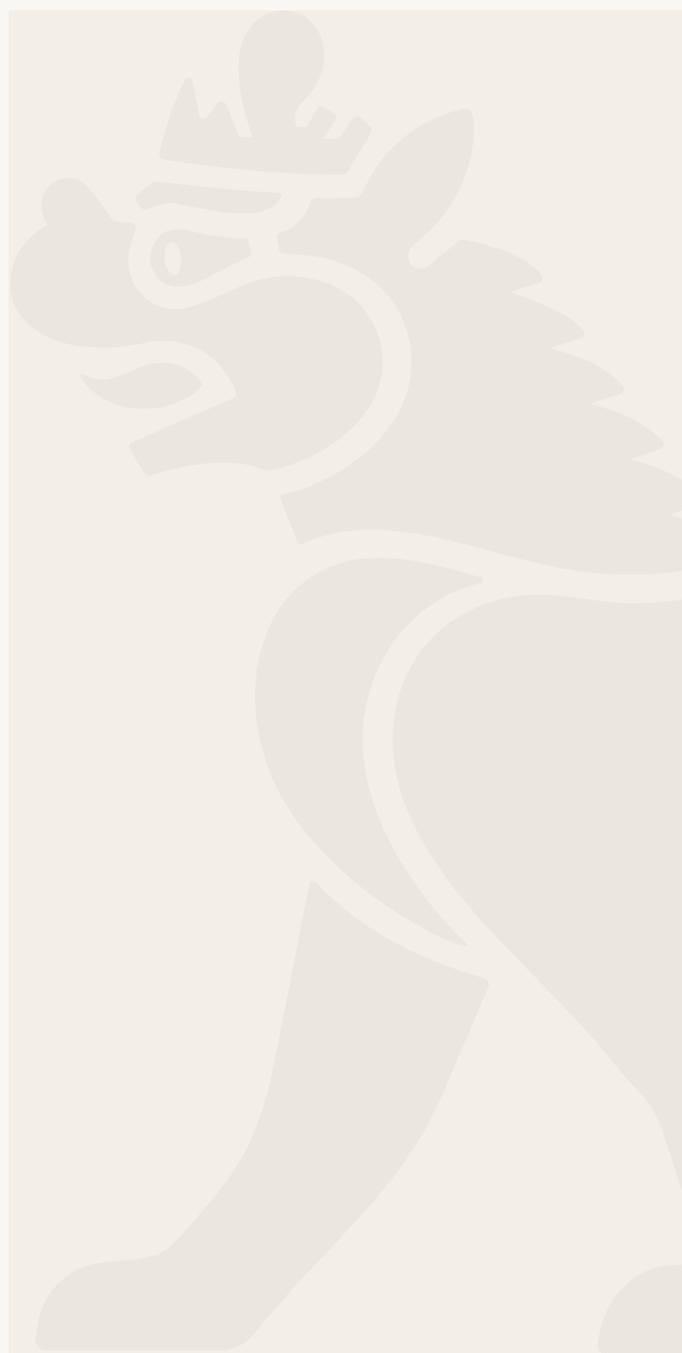
In Budgets: Gender-neutral recovery budgets and policies will recreate the unequal status quo of pre-COVID Asia. The economy was never a level playing field and to achieve positive disruption, targeted and tailored responses addressing social norms and prevailing gender inequalities are needed. This would not only promote inclusion and equality, but also make business sense. Indeed, in Mongolia, ADB has estimated that reducing gender gaps could lead to a 0.5 per cent increase in per capita annual growth rate — a substantial and much-needed boost to pandemic-hit economies.

In economies: A gender-transformative recovery will need a whole-of-economy response. While governments should play a central role through standard-setting regulations, resource allocation, stamping out discrimination, or incentivising change (e.g. through fiscal subsidies in favour of childcare), coalitions for transformative change will need to be forged and reinforced with the private sector and civil society organisations.

In governance: Accountability mechanisms for government and corporate recovery programs are essential for assessing public commitments vis-a-vis results and resources for gender equality. Scaling up the use of governance tools such as gender-responsive budgeting or sex-disaggregated data collection and analysis should become part of the new norm in Asia's recovery. Last year in Fiji, for example, ADB supported the government of Fiji to adopt gender-responsive budgeting in their public management systems.

As Asia's economies emerge from the pandemic, ADB will continue to invest in these lessons on how to capitalize on the disruptions of 2020 in order to foster a gender transformative recovery that may, at last, enable women and girls to positively disrupt and shape the new normal.

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PART 2

Politics

Dynasties' Daughters and Martyrs' Widows: Female Leaders and Gender Inequality in Asia



Of the thirteen national female leaders of state in contemporary Asia, only one has no direct connection to a notable political dynasty — Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen.

The other dozen female prime ministers, presidents or de facto leaders who have exercised national political power (and not held largely symbolic political offices) in South and East Asia during

the second half of the last century and beginning of the 21st century were the wives, widows, sisters and daughters of their husbands, brothers or fathers.

These men had led independence struggles, ruling parties, or opposition movements with many of them facing political persecution or were even assassinated. Women dynasts such as Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India, President Corazon Aquino of the Philippines, Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar are among the best known modern Asian leaders.

This relatively large number of female leaders in Asia appears surprising given their general paucity

As of September 2021, only 13 of 193 countries had a female head of government, or less than seven per cent

globally. As of September 2021, only 13 of 193 countries had a female head of government, or less than seven per cent. While this represents an increase over previous years, it still means it will take at least another

130 years (!) for parity in male and female national leadership to be achieved, according to United Nations estimates.

These women have led Asian countries that mostly have high levels of gender inequality. The Global Gender Index calculates the gap between women and men in health, education, economy and politics. In the 2021 report, except for the Philippines, countries with female dynastic leaders were ranked near the bottom, raising the question of how these women leaders were able to break through this (very low) glass ceiling in their rise to power.

Traditional religious practices are also often seen as an obstacle to female leadership. There are significant religious-based discriminatory practices in the predominantly Buddhist countries of Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand which have had female dynastic

It is striking how few women's rights initiatives these leaders have undertaken.

leaders. There have been two female dynastic leaders in the Catholic Philippines where conservative religious teachings limit gender equality. Women have also come to power in the

predominantly Islamic countries of Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Pakistan where, as Siti Musdah Mulia points out, it is "no secret that religion and state 'conspire' against women." Why have there

been so many female dynastic leaders in Asia despite seemingly hostile cultural contexts?

In addition, once female leaders came to power, they often faced fierce resistance — civilian protests, military coups, or assassination. Finally, it is striking how few women's rights initiatives these leaders have undertaken, with little if any improvement in gender equality in the countries they have ruled.

Why so many Asian female dynastic leaders?

Female leaders' succession to political power was organised by the followers of the deceased or persecuted male politician who often had to push these usually previously apolitical women into leadership roles. A dynastic successor is well positioned to unite a political party, faction, or movement behind them that might splinter after the leaders' untimely death. In terms of popular appeal, it was of great advantage to be able to claim the political inheritance of charismatic leaders who were often seen as political martyrs.

Crucial to understanding this female "political inheritance" is that it was aided, not harmed by traditional stereotypes in patriarchal societies, as Linda Richter has argued. As women, these leaders could be portrayed as largely apolitical — virtuous alternatives to corrupt Machiavellian men. A male dynast successor was more likely to be judged on his own merits, making it difficult for him to inherit the mantle of charisma from a father or brother to whom he might be compared unfavourably. But viewed through the lens of traditional gender roles, women leaders could serve as political avatars without being directly juxtaposed with their fathers or husbands.

Women have thus benefited from their association with traditional female roles, which is why they were often referred to as "mother" (e.g. Indonesia's Megawati Sukarnoputri), "sister" (Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto), or "aunt" (the Philippines' Corazon Aquino) by their supporters. For those women leaders who led or played a major role in democratic opposition movements where they faced repression, sometimes over decades, this gendered moral capital increased further, as Claudia Derichs, Andrea Fleschenberg, and Momoyo Hüstebeck have argued.

The case of Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar illustrates how gender stereotyping can sometimes prove a political plus. Suu Kyi, who had been living abroad with her British husband and two children, was in Myanmar to care for her gravely ill mother when she was recruited to lead opposition to military rule in August 1988. Aware of her potential popularity as the daughter of independence hero Aung San, oppositionists saw her as a means to win mass support for a fledgling movement attempting to organize nationally over a short period. Many Burmese had grown up with Aung San's picture on their walls showing he was very much alive in the country's national historical lore. Suu Kyi's gendered inherited charisma was initially her greatest political asset and helped keep a fractious opposition united. As Fleschenberg has shown, despite being put under several periods of house arrest for nearly two decades, Suu Kyi's appeal to ordinary Burmese has never waned, making her the unchallenged centre of anti-regime protest (with Suu Kyi briefly becoming the country's de facto leader as State Counsellor from 2016-2021 between two periods of military rule, most recently through the February 2021 coup).

Of course, these were no ordinary women but all members of prominent political clans. As Nankyung Choi concludes, this shows that in these Asian cases "patriarchal political culture" has not posed "an obstacle to women from privileged families." Social class trumped gender for these elite women leaders.

The downfall or discrediting of female successors

Female dynastic leaders have been jailed (South Korean president Park Geun-hye and Philippine president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo), toppled by military coups (Suu Kyi in Myanmar and Yingluck Shinawatra in Thailand), and even assassinated (Gandhi in India and Bhutto in Pakistan). It was often the same qualities that helped these women to rise to national leadership that contributed to their political downfall. The emphasis of the virtuous character of traditional female roles in patriarchal societies helped women rise to leadership positions. After taking power, however, being a woman suddenly became a distinct handicap. Despite their allies' (and sometimes even their husbands') hypocritical praise during their

ascent to leadership, once in office, they often called on them to restrict themselves to a symbolic role, with actual authority delegated to men.

In the Philippines, after toppling dictator Ferdinand Marcos to become president in 1986, Aquino faced two deeply antagonistic male rivals in her own cabinet, including her vice president Salvador Laurel, who demanded Aquino make him "virtual head of state". Defence Minister Juan Ponce Enrile launched a series of military coup attempts, with Laurel openly supporting one revealingly called "God Save the Queen". This would have returned Aquino to her "proper" role as a woman, as a mere symbol, not the real holder of political power, which, as the ideology of patriarchy made clear, was a man's job.

In addition, charges of political corruption put a quick end to several Asian women leaders' near monopoly on "moral capital". While several were accused of malfeasance when in power and two imprisoned after leaving office, no case was as spectacular as that of South Korea's Park who was stripped of the presidency in 2016 and given a long term jail sentence in 2017 (she was pardoned in 2021) after mass protests following a major scandal. Earlier in her political career, she had been seen as the "incarnation of her father", president and dictator Park Chung-hee,

Having contrasted themselves with corrupt male Machiavellians, women leaders were held to high moral standards which they were often unable to uphold.

which provided her with "legendary status among conservatives" and made her the "Queen of Elections" in which she led her otherwise unpopular party to over-perform electorally. But during her presidency, as details of bribery, corrupt connections and extensive privilege

emerged, Hyejin Kim argues her image morphed into that of a spoiled "princess", with only 4 per cent of South Koreans expressing support in the end for her tragic presidency.

Another major cause of controversy was the national legacy these female leaders claimed to represent based on the nationalist stance of their fathers or husbands. The first dynastic female leader in Asia, Sri Lankan prime minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, continued the intolerant pro-Sinhalese Buddhist

policies of her assassinated husband, further alienating Hindu Tamils and paving the way for eventual civil war. In Bangladesh, competing notions of national identity (Bengali vs. Muslim) deepened the political conflict between the two “Begums”, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, who not only long alternated in power but also were fighting over what kind of nation Bangladesh should be. Under the guise of combating Islamist extremism, Hasina has now established what Christine Fair has termed “one-woman rule” in which she rigs elections and persecutes opponents, including Zia who has been sentenced to a long jail term. In Myanmar, Suu Kyi, the daughter of the Burman Buddhist national hero, defended the Myanmar military against accusations of genocide against the minority Muslim Rohingya at the UN’s highest court in The Hague despite her being championed by human rights groups when she has been persecuted by these same armed forces.

Why has so little been done to advance women’s rights?

Female dynastic leaders’ willingness to assume traditional gender roles helps explain why few dynastic female leaders fought strongly for greater gender equality. Choi argues this shows a “stubborn unwillingness to challenge the prevailing patriarchal gender ideology, explaining their disappointing record in improving other women’s rights and status”. As Susan Blackburn has shown in Indonesia, Megawati, who was widely celebrated as symbolizing women’s advancement in the country when she became the country’s first female president in 2001, was much less proactive on women’s issues compared to her male predecessor President Wahid Abdurrahman. Although Sri Lanka’s Bandaranaike was proud of being the world’s first modern female leader, she put little emphasis on reducing gender inequalities, with the number of women politicians not increasing significantly during her tenure.

Even the woman credited with having done the most for women’s rights while in office, Pakistan’s Bhutto, left behind a distinctly mixed record. As prime minister, Bhutto was celebrated when she spoke at the United Nations Fourth World Conference

on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, as the first woman ever elected to head an Islamic nation. Advocating for women’s rights of women in a predominantly Islamic society, she became “a symbol of hope for women on a global scale.” But Bhutto was also at the centre of a patronage-based political system in a country in which feudal-like conditions were still common and in which she faced vehement opposition from Islamists. Her husband (through a traditional marriage arranged by her mother) was dubbed “Mr 10 Per cent” for the huge kickbacks he allegedly collected while his wife was in power. Pakistani women remained largely impoverished and home-bound, with limited access to education and little protection against sex crimes (laws were only tightened by Bhutto’s male successor). According to Pakistani activist Unaiza Malik, “women benefited very little under her”. Bhutto only became “an icon” after her assassination, leading people to view her through “rose-tinted glasses rather than remembering the corruption charges, her lack of achievements, or how much she was manipulated.”

Isolated at the top

In Asia, a dozen female leaders who were the widows, wives, sisters or daughters of assassinated or disgraced male leaders took power “over his dead body” – to use Diane Kincaid’s phrase about widows who succeeded their late husbands in the U.S. Congress – or at least under the sway of their father or husband’s political legacy. As the widows, wives or daughters of popular politicians – often leaders of independence struggles martyred through assassination or political persecution – they were seen to have inherited their charisma. As women they proved better political avatars because, judged in traditional gender terms, they were not expected to match the political qualities of their male predecessors. Instead, they were more easily portrayed as reluctant politicians, selflessly taking on a heavy political burden as “mothers”, “daughters”, or “sisters” of the nation in order to rescue it from crisis. Viewed through this traditional gender lens (which they often instrumentalised) as weak and apolitical, they were not seen as threatening to potential male rivals, allowing them

to unite an opposition movement or political party and more easily win political power.

Once in office, however, the very qualities that had helped propel them to the top began to work against them, often leading to their political downfall. Male politicians agitated against them when they began exercising authority as they had expected these female leaders to reign not rule. Having contrasted themselves with corrupt male Machiavellians, women leaders were held to high moral standards which they were often unable to uphold, with many female leaders engulfed in corruption scandals. Their inherited claims to represent the nation sometimes led them to ignore international human rights standards and democratic procedures, surprising one-time foreign supporters. Dynastic female leaders in Asia have been accused, not always unfairly, of ruling according to their own familial interests and claiming to be the sole legitimate representatives of the nation.

These dynastic leaders' willingness to assume traditional gender roles also helps explain why few of them fought strongly for greater gender equality. More generally, as Farida Jalalzai has shown in a global study of female leaders, "a country with a woman leader does not signify the end of gender discrimination." This only becomes possible when women are "equally represented in all facets of society."

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Why Law Reform Will Beat Cultural Change in the Campaign for Gender Equality at Work



Rapid transformation in the structure of many economies in the Asia-Pacific is paralleled by changing employment and workforce dynamics. Part of the complex story of economic transformation in the region is the rising proportion of women participating in formal employment.

While national trends and rates vary across the region, in many countries women are increasing their workforce participation. This marks a significant change in women's employment patterns.

Yet labour law and workplace policies have not kept abreast of these changes, leaving traditional social norms unchallenged.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the gendered nature of labour markets and unpaid care responsibilities. The impact of the current crisis on the unequal distribution of work and care between men and women across the Asia-Pacific region is significant, reflecting the general pattern in countries around the globe. Previous research on the impact of health and economic crises show that women's equality gains can be pushed back and that the effects of economic downturn are long lasting – up to seven years – unless there are direct interventions from governments to correct inequalities.

In this essay, we look at the way in which inadequate employment legislation may hold back gender equality by reinforcing gendered behaviours and expectations.

Improved equal pay legislation can promote change by disrupting the practices and mindsets of employers and communities.

For example, The World Bank's Women, Business and the Law Report 2021 shows global gaps in gender inequality remain particularly persistent in the areas of pay and parenthood. For example, less than half of the globe's

economies mandate equal remuneration for work of equal value and most that do are high-income economies. Only a few East Asian and Pacific nations have equal pay laws. Improved equal pay legislation can promote change by disrupting the practices and mindsets of employers and communities. Legislation is important for signalling the direction of change a government wants to take and promoting that change through the economy. Laws can change behaviour, and thus norms and cultures, and this is more effective than waiting for culture to change of its own accord. If equality is a genuine goal of countries in the Asia-Pacific region, then showing leadership through legislation is needed.

Different rules abound, but women are playing a bigger role in the economy

The Asia-Pacific is an extremely diverse region, marked by rapid change and contrasts. In many countries (e.g. India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Indonesia), informal economic arrangements are widespread and women historically make up the

majority of these informal workers. Employment in the informal economy is characterised by low pay, insecurity, inadequate social security protection and exploitation. These conditions prevail largely because formal labour law rarely applies to informal enterprises and those engaged in informal employment relationships. In other countries (e.g. Japan, South Korea, Singapore), the rates of women in the formal economy have increased, and it is now the dominant form of employment. Whether informal or formal employment arrangements prevail, gender inequality is a feature of the region. For example, Japan, South Korea, China, India and Indonesia are ranked in the bottom third of the Global Gender Gap Index 2021 rankings. However, the shift in women's workforce participation – from rural agriculture to waged work in metropolitan centres, from owner-operated and micro-enterprises to large national or multi-national firms, from informal to formal employment – has led the World Bank to conclude that women in the region “are better positioned today than ever before to participate in and contribute to their countries' development”.

As more women enter, and are encouraged to enter, the formal paid labour forces of the Asia-Pacific,

Gender equality will require policies that address inequalities in two domains: work and care.

the different legislative frameworks under which they are employed, and their capacity to support equality in the workplace are providing valuable case studies on how to drive better outcomes for women. However, gender

equality will require policies that address inequalities in two domains: work and care. A majority of men and women across the Asia-Pacific report a preference for female labour force participation, but legislative frameworks lag community expectations.

Legislation and workplace policies that support women and men's equal contribution to unpaid care will support efforts to increase women's participation in formal paid employment. For example, labour law that focuses on national economic development, encouraging female labour force participation, is often not supported by parallel laws on the public provision of childcare or flexible working hours. These laws leave women workers exposed

to the double burden of active engagement in paid work coupled with caring responsibilities. COVID-19 has exacerbated this tension.

Where labour law does not support the socialisation or redistribution of care, most women are unable to 'compete' with men in the workplace as equals and are relegated to less secure, lower paid employment at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy with limited career opportunities.

There are many labour laws that influence women's employment — some drive formal gender equality at work while others remain deeply entrenched in normative assumptions about working men and women. Most countries across the Asia-Pacific include labour laws that provide women with formal equality with men, including legislation for equal pay, non-discrimination in hiring, and workplace sexual harassment. The [Philippines and Vietnam](#) in particular provide broad legislative protection for women at work. Other laws provide specific support for women workers in their role as mothers. This includes paid maternity leave, breastfeeding breaks and workplace childcare. Again, most countries in the region provide some paid maternity leave but breastfeeding is not well supported in legislation, with the Philippines and Vietnam again leading in this area. Only Vietnam provides workplace childcare and no country provides for women's job guarantee on return from maternity leave. According to the [World Bank](#), only 56 per cent of economies in East Asia and the Pacific and 50 per cent in South Asia prohibit the dismissal of pregnant workers.

Women-specific legislation is also quite common across the region. The Philippines, India and Indonesia provide protection from night working, [protection for domestic workers](#) is mandated in the Philippines, Thailand and Cambodia and [paid menstrual leave](#) is provided in South Korea, Taiwan, some Chinese provinces, Vietnam and Indonesia. The private sector in India has also been an enthusiastic adopter of menstrual leave. Legislation that challenges traditional gender norms is less prevalent. Though short periods of paid/unpaid paternity leave are beginning to be introduced, flexible forms of work and regular part-time work are much less common in Asian economies compared with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development rich countries.

Paternity leave is gradually changing the workplace for women and men

Paternity leave is one type of leave that clearly reflects gender norms, but which can also effectively disrupt gender behaviours by enabling and incentivising a greater sharing of care between men and women, and by setting up new expectations about care into the future. So, it is an example of the role legislation can play in driving workplace gender equality.

In the Philippines, current legislation provides for 105 days of paid maternity leave at 100 per cent of earnings with the option to extend for 30 days without pay and 7–14 days of paid paternity leave. The Philippines first introduced national paternity leave legislation in 1996, providing married fathers employed in the private and public sectors with seven working days of paid leave at full pay for up to four children. In 2019, changes to the Maternity Leave Act came into effect allowing any female worker entitled to maternity leave to transfer up to seven of her 105 days of paid leave to the child's father, regardless of whether they are married or not. This new policy means men are eligible for up to 14 paid leave days. In Vietnam, mothers are entitled to [24 weeks maternity leave at full wage rate](#). Mandatory, state-sponsored paternity leave paid from social insurance came into effect in Vietnam in 2016. Employed, married fathers are entitled to [paid paternity leave](#) for between five to 14 days, with the duration of allowed leave depending on the type of birth, number of children born and if the child is adopted. Indonesian women are entitled to 14 weeks paid maternity leave. Indonesia introduced paternity leave paid for by employers in 2003. The policy provides employed, married fathers with two days of paternity leave at full pay for the birth of a child or a miscarriage. Male public servants in Indonesia are eligible for one month of paternity leave during which they receive their basic pay.

Japan, by contrast, although having a larger formal labour market for both men and women, has 14 weeks paid maternity leave for women, but no statutory entitlement for fathers, indicating a highly gendered orientation to work and care. There is provision for Parental Leave which can be taken by each parent until a child is 12 months old but recent uptake figures indicate that just 12 per cent of male workers used this leave in 2020 and for less than five days. (Interestingly, a 2021 amendment to provide specific paternity leave was introduced to shift the fathers' leave behaviour.) A similar pattern exists in China, which has 98 calendar days of paid maternity leave for mothers, but no national paid paternity leave for fathers. There is also no right to broader parental leave in China. In contrast, South Korea has 90 days paid maternity leave at 100 per cent of earnings, and ten days of paternity leave also at full pay.

The above examples highlight the wide range of policies available across the Asia-Pacific region and demonstrate the gaps between leave options for women and men, which reflect and reinforce long-held assumptions about the role of women in the paid workforce and the unpaid domain of home and care. Legislation alone may not change gender norms and practices, but it does help in shifting the behaviours of fathers and men, as experience from the Nordic countries shows.

Not only do good parental leave policies including maternity and paternity leave disrupt expectations of caring, they also compensate women for time

When designing and implementing maternity and paternity leave, it is important to learn from the experiences of other countries.

lost to childbirth and may also encourage businesses to follow suit. However, these forms of policy must be supported by additional equal opportunity policies for women and individuals need to be encouraged to use these benefits — introducing policy is one thing, ensuring its

uptake is another. When designing and implementing maternity and paternity leave, it is important to learn from the experiences of other countries. It is known, for instance, that when paternity leave is paid

at a high wage rate, accompanied by incentives for the family to take extra leave and is non-transferable and ring-fenced for men alone, it is most effective at encouraging men to use the benefit.

Workplace changes flow on to family life and school performance

Paternity leave policies benefit governments, families and businesses. Gender-egalitarian policies are associated with higher fertility rates and assist governments in achieving their targets for improved female workforce participation. Fathers also form stronger relationships with their wives and children, which is linked to lower levels of intimate partner violence. Fathers who take paternity leave may also experience lower levels of depression and reductions in levels of smoking and alcohol consumption. And importantly for shifting gender norms, paternity leave has been linked to the increased involvement of fathers in unpaid household labour. Increased involvement of the father in a child's early years is also associated with better family relationships, which often translates to higher school performance outcomes. For businesses, the case for paternity leave is also persuasive. Paternity leave policies signal more supportive corporate cultures and lead to increases in commitment from employees, which assists in the attraction and retention of staff.

Work and family policies are constantly changing across the world but it is timely, especially post-COVID, for countries in the Asia-Pacific region to review their own laws and practices if gender equality is to be improved at both work and home. The outcomes for society, families and future growth are improved when such policies are in place.

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**Table 1. Labour force participation rates across the Asia-Pacific region 1999–2019
(% of population ages 15+) (modelled ILO estimate)**

| Country | Sex | Year | | |
|-------------|--------|------|------|------|
| | | 1999 | 2009 | 2019 |
| Australia | Female | 53.8 | 58.9 | 60.8 |
| | Male | 72.2 | 72.3 | 71.1 |
| Bangladesh | Female | 26.6 | 29.4 | 36.4 |
| | Male | .. | .. | .. |
| Cambodia | Female | 77.9 | 77.9 | 76.9 |
| | Male | 81.6 | 87.2 | .. |
| China | Female | 71.5 | 64.6 | 60.6 |
| | Male | 83.8 | 78.6 | 75.7 |
| Hong Kong | Female | 48.9 | 52.7 | 53.7 |
| | Male | 74.0 | 69.4 | 67.5 |
| India | Female | 30.5 | 27.0 | 20.8 |
| | Male | .. | .. | 74.4 |
| Indonesia | Female | 50.6 | 50.5 | 53.8 |
| | Male | 83.6 | 82.0 | 82.4 |
| Japan | Female | 49.6 | 48.8 | 53.6 |
| | Male | 76.9 | 72.0 | 71.4 |
| Malaysia | Female | 44.8 | 43.7 | 51.3 |
| | Male | 82.8 | .. | 80.8 |
| Myanmar | Female | 60.3 | 54.3 | 46.2 |
| | Male | .. | .. | 75.5 |
| Nepal | Female | 81.6 | 79.4 | 81.5 |
| | Male | 90.2 | .. | .. |
| New Zealand | Female | 56.5 | 61.3 | 64.9 |
| | Male | 73.4 | 74.4 | 75.4 |

| Country | Sex | Year | | |
|------------------|--------|------|------|------|
| | | 1999 | 2009 | 2019 |
| Pakistan | Female | 15.5 | 20.7 | 21.7 |
| | Male | .. | 79.0 | .. |
| Papua New Guinea | Female | 70.2 | 49.8 | 46.4 |
| | Male | .. | .. | .. |
| Philippines | Female | 47.8 | 48.3 | 47.1 |
| | Male | 81.8 | 75.3 | 72.4 |
| Singapore | Female | 51.7 | 56.9 | 61.9 |
| | Male | .. | 76.3 | 75.4 |
| South Korea | Female | 47.8 | 49.3 | 53.8 |
| | Male | 74.4 | 73.3 | 73.6 |
| Sri Lanka | Female | 37.9 | 36.3 | 33.6 |
| | Male | 77.5 | 71.6 | 73.0 |
| Thailand | Female | 64.9 | 64.8 | 58.8 |
| | Male | 80.3 | 81.3 | 75.5 |
| Vietnam | Female | 72.3 | 71.5 | 72.7 |
| | | 76.9 | 80.4 | 77.2 |

Source: The World Bank, DataBank 'World Development Indicators'

How Women Have Changed the International Security Agenda



The appointment of women to senior diplomatic and security positions in the Indo-Pacific is on the rise.

Australia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, New Zealand and Samoa now all have women foreign ministers, with Australia's former Foreign Minister, Marise Payne, also having served as the country's first female Defence Minister. The number of women appointed to senior ambassadorial roles, and as leaders in national security establishments, is also growing.

The increasing number of women in these leadership roles marks an encouraging, and long overdue, change to a landscape traditionally dominated by men. This is bringing with it a fundamental shift in the dynamics and culture of international and regional engagement, and decision making.

As Australian Ambassador to Vietnam from 2019 – 2022, and as a diplomat serving in regional and United Nations posts over the course of my career, I have been proud to play my part in this process of shifting the dial towards a more gender-focused, inclusive approach to international diplomacy and security.

Shaping the international agenda

The increased representation of women has occurred in parallel with the growing focus on gender-related issues across foreign policy and international security over the past two decades.

A key foundation of this change occurred in 2000 with the adoption of UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. This resolution put the spotlight on gender equality and equity aspects of the UNSC's agenda by formally acknowledging that women and girls were disproportionately affected by armed conflict. It called for a gender perspective in peace negotiations and peacekeeping operations and asked UN Member States to increase women's participation in negotiations and conflict resolution efforts.

More than twenty years after the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1325, the women, peace and security agenda has become an accepted part of international discussion on conflict prevention and resolution, and a core element of international peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations.

Australia has been proud to work alongside our regional partners to support the mainstreaming of the women, peace and security agenda, as a key pillar of our engagement and partnership.

Vietnam has also been a significant player on women, peace and security issues. As President of the UNSC in 2009, during its first term as a non-permanent Security Council member, Vietnam held an Open Debate on women, peace and security. Vietnam subsequently sponsored the passage of resolution 1889, the first UNSC resolution to highlight the needs and rights of women and girls in post-conflict situations.

Women, peace and security also featured prominently in Vietnam's ASEAN Chair year in 2021 and its recently concluded second term on the UNSC (2020-2021). In December 2020, on the twentieth anniversary

of UNSC Resolution 1325, Vietnam hosted a UN High-Level Conference on women, peace and security. The Conference issued the 'Hanoi Commitment to Action' which committed co-sponsors to further strengthen women's representation and leadership in peacekeeping, continue mainstreaming and funding the women, peace and security agenda and to promote the role of women in addressing new and emerging challenges.

Australia has worked with Vietnam through bilateral, regional and multilateral channels to advance our shared interests in women, peace and security. In November 2021, Australia and Vietnam co-chaired the Second ASEAN-Australia Women, Peace and Security Dialogue at which former Foreign Minister Payne underlined Australia's support for women, peace and security-related activities under the ASEAN-Australia Political Security Partnership.

The benefits of women in senior diplomatic roles

As the 2015 UN Global Study on Resolution 1325 stated, women's role in security is undeniable — the role of women in brokering peace means that it is more likely to be long lasting. Similarly, women's contribution to broader diplomatic engagement across all fields brings a more diverse set of perspectives and strengths which add depth and richness to insights, engagement and influence.

When women see other women leading the conversation in any field, it inspires them to do the same, and to aim high.

Women diplomats are able to get below the surface in previously uncharted areas, away from discussions that may have traditionally taken place on the golf course or over a beer.

Moreover, more diverse representation in diplomatic missions helps to expand networks and open new doors, allowing us to identify the full range of issues and pressures affecting the security, social and economic landscape in our partner countries. And this makes for more effective diplomacy.

While all diplomats bring their personal strengths to the role, in my observation, women diplomats are able to get below the surface in previously uncharted areas, away from discussions that may have traditionally taken place on the golf course or over a beer.

This has been particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic. Australia has focused part of its support for COVID recovery, including in Vietnam, on the pandemic's disproportionate impacts on women and girls. Our networks with women's shelters, domestic violence support groups and relevant partner agencies have enabled us to engage with those most affected, and target assistance to where it is most needed.

In my own career in foreign affairs, I have observed that including more women in Australian delegations can influence counterpart attendance, prompting an increased number of women to be invited to events, and to be offered speaking time in an agenda. When this pattern is repeated by us and others, it plays a part in normalising women's presence and contribution.

We have come a long way in terms of women's diplomatic representation since I joined the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in 1990. At the time there were very few senior women diplomats and only four serving women Ambassadors or Heads of Post in our global network. While there was change in the wind, with more women entering the diplomatic service, the institutional and cultural barriers to their progression to senior levels were still alive and well.

This situation began to change in the 2000s as the junior women who joined around the same time as me began to rise through the ranks, but it was not until 2015 that DFAT took decisive action to promote women in leadership. That year saw the launch of the Women in Leadership Strategy, which identified many of the tangible and intangible barriers to women's progress and introduced practical solutions to address these.

One powerful element of the Strategy was the introduction of the "if not, why not" principle. This tackled the unspoken assumptions that women were not suited for particular roles, and reflected flexible practices which allow all employees to request working arrangements that suit their personal circumstances. Managers making decisions on such issues were asked to consider "why not" if women (or men) were not being put forward or supported for these opportunities, or were not being supported for flexible work arrangements. It was not long before this concept took hold, driving a change in culture and attitude.

The Strategy has seen a dramatic increase in the proportion of women leaders in DFAT, and an impressive increase in women representing Australia abroad at the most senior levels. In 2016,

women accounted for 25 per cent of Australia's Heads of Mission or Post. Within the past six years, this has nearly doubled, and at the time of writing, there are 44 female Heads of Mission or post around our diplomatic network. Today in DFAT diversity and inclusion are recognised as being key to successful leadership.

Australian women are now a very visible presence in the international diplomatic network. In the Indo-Pacific we have female Heads of Missions in Indonesia, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Thailand as well as an Ambassador-designate in the Philippines and a chargé d'Affaires in Myanmar. We have female DHOMs in India, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Tokyo and Thailand. An increasing number of women head up Australian agencies at our diplomatic missions including Defence, Home Affairs and the Australian Federal Police. The current, and both immediate former Secretaries of Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade are women. We are not the only country in the region to make progress, but our recent efforts are helping to change the complexion of diplomacy.

How to continue the momentum?

Building momentum towards stronger women's representation in any field takes time, and concrete, practical actions. Maintaining momentum requires strong leadership and commitment, so that there is a permanent shift from a context where women are 'first in their field', and thereby a precarious

Maintaining momentum requires strong leadership and commitment.

novelty, to one where women are a secure and critical mass. The importance of role models, and a willingness by those who have already assumed leadership to talk about their experience and to support others to follow cannot be overstated.

Diversity in leadership and inclusive solutions have served us well over recent years as we continue to grapple with a range of security issues beyond traditional defence, particularly the health pandemic and climate change. Such events are threatening our region's prosperity and stability. Peace is more lasting, stability more likely and economies stronger when women and girls are treated equitably, and their contributions recognised. We are also more resilient to shocks such as COVID and climate events.

There are clear advantages in continuing to promote women leaders in diplomacy, defence and security. Australia has found a willing partner in Vietnam. Learning from Australia's own women in leadership journey, we are working with Vietnam on its journey — championing Vietnam to get to their 'firsts' and for this to then become the norm.

Australia now spends close to 22 per cent of our annual development cooperation assistance in Vietnam on initiatives specifically designed to tackle gender inequalities. This is alongside integrating gender equality into our aid investments where the main objective is not gender equality, but where these investments present opportunity to address gender issues during implementation.

In support of women in diplomacy, in 2019, then Foreign Minister Payne, together with Vietnam's then Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh, signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on Women's Empowerment in the Foreign Service. Under this MoU, the Embassy facilitated a joint forum and training program on women's empowerment in the digital age specifically for Vietnam's Foreign Ministry. This provided an opportunity for senior women DFAT officials to share their experiences of leadership with Vietnam's senior women leaders in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as provide training for junior Vietnamese diplomats in understanding gender norms. Planning for similar engagements is already underway.

Our efforts to support Vietnam's women in leadership, as well as those aspiring to leadership, extend across our development program, from our Australia Awards Scholarships, for which women now make up 65-75 per cent of awardees, to the multiple leadership programs we are running for mid-ranking and senior political and public servants. We are also supporting women-led and -owned businesses, with a focus on ethnic minority women, to access market opportunities and build their leadership skills.

Beyond our development program, Australia's support for women, peace and security has guided our support to Vietnam's ambition to scale up its contribution to international peacekeeping efforts. This includes Australia's support to Vietnam to achieve its objectives for greater representation of women in its peacekeeping ranks. For its Level 2 Field Hospital

in South Sudan (part of United Nations Mission in South Sudan), which Australia supports through the provision of strategic airlift, Vietnam has increased its representation of women peacekeepers from 15.9 per cent to 21 per cent in three years, with a target of 25 per cent by 2025.

There is a strong relationship between the Gender, Peace and Security team at Australia's Peace Operations Training Centre in Canberra and Vietnam's Department of Peacekeeping Operations, including a seconded Vietnamese officer to Australia. Australia also provides gender awareness training to Vietnamese military officers through our Defence Cooperation Program.

The ability of Australia to 'walk the talk' on women's leadership, by having women in senior roles, gives us more legitimacy to work with Vietnam and others in our region. Progress is encouraging and this needs to be celebrated and quickly cemented in place.

Women have been excluded from the diplomatic and security conversations at senior levels for too long.

The ability of Australia to 'walk the talk' on women's leadership, by having women in senior roles, gives us more legitimacy to work with Vietnam and others in our region.

Globally, we need policies and solutions with adequate funding and implementation that engage all levels of communities and allow us the best chance of a secure, prosperous and stable region. Change is already underway, and the momentum is building in our own region and beyond. Young women entering the diplomatic and security fields

in 2022 can confidently aspire to the most senior levels of leadership and the mantra "if not, why not" is alive and well in the minds of the next generation of diplomats.

Australia will continue to do what we can in our own diplomatic service, and across the region to support all countries to reach and then move beyond their 'firsts' in diplomacy and other fields. Through our actions, and our advocacy, we will continue to play our part in building a region where equitable and diverse gender representation at senior levels in international diplomacy is normalised. Our entire region stands to benefit.

Robyn Mudie is Australia's former Australian Ambassador to Vietnam.

Women: Missing (but) in Action in Japanese Politics



Discussion about women in politics in Japan will often start with a look at where the country stands on the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) leader board. In its November 2021 report, the IPU ranked Japan at 165.

This takes into account the October election result in which one prominent long-serving parliamentarian, Tsujimoto Kiyomi, actually lost her seat, unexpectedly, reducing the number of women in the lower house to 45 out of 465 members.

By contrast, the same report puts Australia at 56. But these figures tell only a part of the story. As an academic living in and studying both countries, my research interest seeks to focus on reasons for this difference in ranking when, a broader look at the roles of women in both societies, suggests there is a lesser gap than those numbers indicate.

The 2021 lower house election actually provided a few surprises about women in politics as well as avenues to ask ‘what next?’, especially with the upper house election due in July 2022. Some international attention was given to the governing Liberal Democratic Party’s presidential election in September

The world, and not just Japan, has trouble coming to terms with the idea that women can and should be holding office in national parliaments.

2021 with two women among the four candidates vying to replace Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide. Politics being what it is, a set of factional plays decided the result in Kishida Fumio’s favour but, almost 76 years since women were first elected to parliament in

Japan, what might Takaichi Sanae and Noda Seiko’s pursuit of the prime ministership herald for women in politics in Japan?

Why do people become interested in politics? What leads one person to want to pursue high political office while her next-door neighbour might prefer engagement at the local school’s parents and teachers committee? Both emerge from a socio-political milieu in a Japan that does not discourage political actions but can nonetheless quickly slam down those who might want to disrupt a seemingly rigid gender discourse. The world, and not just Japan, has trouble coming to terms with the idea that women can and should be holding office in national parliaments. Those who reach the highest offices are inevitably held to higher and tougher standards than their male counterparts and this in itself adds pressure to those women seeking office. These limitations of

Industry, companies, and educational institutions talk the talk about gender inclusion, gender parity, gender equity, yet all around us, the gaps continue to be the lived experience.

course are not confined to the political world. Like its IPU counterpart, the World Economic Gender Gap Report, including health, economic and educational indices, similarly ranks Japan down the list, most recently at 120 out of 153 countries.

Each time these international reports are released, the results are taken up in the media and questions are asked about what needs to be done. My office bookshelves heave under the weight of texts

addressing gender issues in politics and other areas. Newspapers devote much space to gender. When we hear reports of universities making entrance more difficult for female students we rise in anger at the inequity. Industry, companies, and educational institutions talk the talk about gender inclusion, gender parity, gender equity, yet all around us, the gaps continue to be the lived experience. The question is not *if* change can be made, but how, how long it will take and indeed what form those changes will take.

Universal suffrage was finally granted for the first election post-World War Two, held in 1946. Women had been actively seeking the right to vote in the first half of the 20th century, finally granted as part of the democratic reforms introduced by the Occupation Command. Thirty-nine women were elected in that first post-war election, a figure that was not achieved again until the early years of the 21st century. The highest number for women’s representation was achieved in the 2009 election: 54 out of 480 seats in the lower house, compared with today’s 45 (out of 465 seats). Representation is higher in the upper house where, at the last election in 2019, 22.9 per cent of seats were held by women (56 out of 245).

In Tokyo, I teach Japanese politics to second- and third-year university students. All have their different reasons for studying in the department. Some plan to go on to be public servants, many focus on a career in private enterprise, a handful are considering an active political career, but most want to understand the political system better and want to understand how and why to vote. Voting in Japan is not compulsory and Japan’s low participation rate (in the mid 50 per cent range) versus Australia’s compulsory voting and consequent high participation (in the low 90 per cent range) is often a topic of discussion. Few students think their one vote will make any difference.

My research suggests a small tweak to this latter list could increase the number of women in the lower house.

Our discussion turns to the voting system. Is the voting system the first hurdle to electoral success for candidates? Japan’s parliament is made up of two houses, the House of Representatives (or lower house) and the House of Councillors (or upper house). The lower house election in 2021

saw 1051 candidates stand for 465 seats. As part of ongoing reforms to parliament, lower house voting consists of two distinct systems. Electors vote for a single representative in one of 289 single-member electorates; the remaining 176 seats are filled proportionately via a party list. Electors thus have two ballot papers to fill out: one with the name of their preferred candidate, the other with their preferred party, from which candidates are chosen according to the party. My research suggests a small tweak to this latter list could increase the number of women in the lower house, if the political parties chose to do so. I will return to this point later.

As our discussion in class deepens, some students are of the view that even if they did vote, their impression of politics is old men making policy according to the wishes of older people who do vote, the so-called 'silver democracy'. A fair impression when just ten per cent of parliamentarians are women. I introduce them to a former representative and candidate for Japan Communist Party (JCP), Ikeuchi Saori. She is a young, progressive woman whose political career has ridden the ebbs and flows of the voting system and with a just small tweak to the system noted earlier, she could be returned to parliament. I have been following her career for a number of years now. In following Ikeuchi, one senses the potential for change sits just below the surface of Japan's political machine.

Ikeuchi was finally elected in 2014, having tried and failed at three earlier elections between 2009 and 2013. In 2014, although she did not succeed in the single-member electorate, she was elected on the strength of her place in the aforementioned party list. She campaigned for reelection in 2017 but failed at both the electorate and list levels. She renewed her campaigning in the area almost immediately, for the 2021 election where, despite a strong campaign, she just failed again, and again on the proportional list. In 2021, in a three-way race for the electorate, Ikeuchi received just under 29 per cent of the vote. (Japan has effectively a first-past-the-post system, not a preferential system like Australia.) Ikeuchi was placed third on the JCP proportional list but the JCP qualified for just two seats there, both occupied by male candidates. As I show the students the figures, we ask 'what if women were given

priority on those party lists?'. I am currently building a database that will hopefully demonstrate that, on present calculations, this shift in priority could quickly and substantially lift the number of women in the lower house. At the end of this discussion, the students have a different appreciation of just 'how' their one vote might contribute to the change they want to see.

In addition, we turn our attention to the conservative parties and I ask students then what of Takaichi Sanae and Noda Seiko both standing as candidates for the LDP presidency. Takaichi and Noda represent quite different approaches to conservative politics, the former being a more 'hard right' admirer of Margaret Thatcher, and an acolyte of former prime minister Abe Shinzo, while Noda takes a stronger equity and diversity approach to politics. Interestingly male students largely preferred Takaichi over Noda. Neither however, were seen as real challengers for the party's top spot. After the election, both women were 'awarded' key positions, Takaichi a senior party position and Noda a ministry. (It is worth noting however, that in several photo opportunities, it has been Noda standing or sitting beside Prime Minister Kishida, not Takaichi, giving more visibility to Noda.)

The 2021 lower house election, the contest for the presidency of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and subsequent office of Prime Minister, and the forthcoming 2022 election for the House of Councillors, inevitably invokes further discussion about raising the numbers of women and members of minority groups in parliament. Indeed, Tsujimoto Kiyomi is seeking to return to the Diet at the House of Councillors election, after losing her lower house seat last year. Some advocate quotas for women, either at the party level or within the parliamentary system. Social media plays a role in promoting the interests of a number of groups from across the political spectrum intent on increasing numbers of women in parliament. Arguably, there is a will for change, but we return to our question of numbers, and what exactly accounts for voter perceptions.

There are prominent women in Japanese politics, on both sides of the chamber and further afield in local government areas. Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko made a reasonably successful shift from the national scene to local politics, has steered the city through the Olympics and the COVID pandemic (although with qualifications that cannot be fully covered here) and was once considered to be in line for becoming Japan's first female prime minister. Is Japan's first female prime minister already in parliament or is she

Perhaps we need to ask women what discourages them from taking up office.

yet to be elected? The less optimistic among us wonder if she is yet to be born? But in 2021, Rengo, the peak body of the union movement elected its first female leader in Yoshino Tomoko.

Perhaps we need to ask women what discourages them from taking up office.

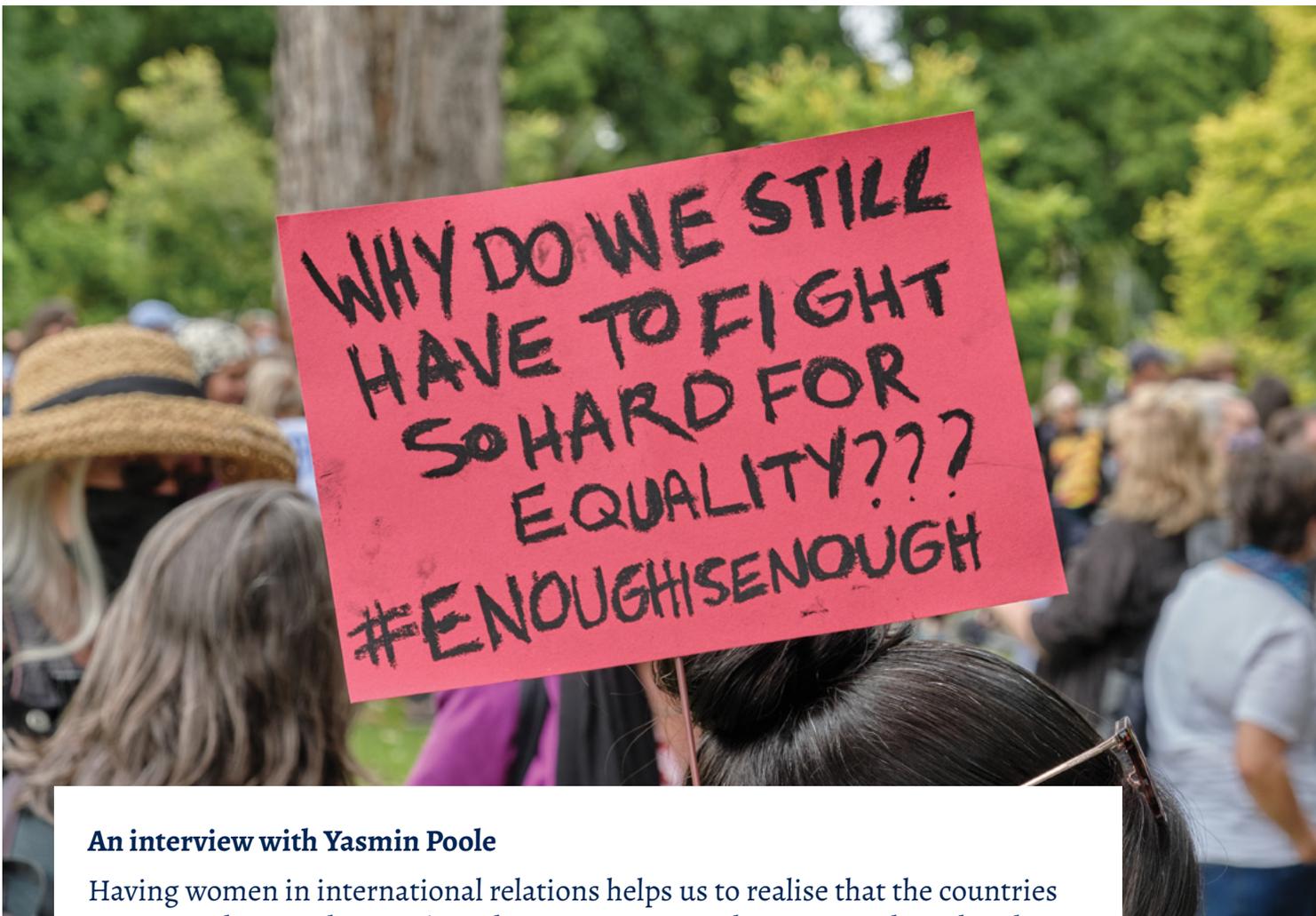
To put a qualitative angle on that IPU gap between Japan and Australia, perhaps we need to ask women what discourages them from taking up office; look at the workplace environment provided by parliament, both as a physical space and the type of politicking that goes on within. While numbers of women in Japanese parliament hover around the ten per cent mark, when I attend political gatherings and seminars, when I participate in local volunteer activities, there are often more women than men present, and the conversation is nearly always politically-attuned. Young women are active in forming or joining groups concerned with critical social and justice issues, enabled by social media. And although the focus of this article has been the place of women in parliament, it is important to note the growing push for greater diversity in Japan's parliament too — LGBTQI+ and differently-abled representatives, amongst others, have increasingly made their presence felt in political participation.

There remains much to critique when it comes to diversity in Japanese politics. The IPU figures cited at the top of this article, if nothing else, always prompt more discussions across various forums. Pop culture references here in Japan, from television series to movies, to novels increasingly show strong women leads, no longer the attendant making the tea. Notwithstanding the leap it will take to get from fiction to reality, realising more women in higher positions is often framed in leadership terms, and maybe that is part of the language we can change too. As I see leadership dialogues becoming more prevalent between, for example, Australian and Japanese groups, perhaps we can shift the engagement to one of participatory dialogues inviting women of all ages and experiences to come together without the pressure of so-called leadership expectations. Grassroots initiatives are often overlooked for their potential to get things done.

No society is static. And as a long-term observer of women's participation in politics in both Japan and Australia, while some positive changes are apparent, the frustrations remain. But in recent times, I wonder whether or not 'party politics' itself, and what it has become, is the problem and that is the paradigm we need to change.

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Mentoring the Next Generation of Women in International Relations



An interview with Yasmin Poole

Having women in international relations helps us to realise that the countries we are working with aren't just abstract entities — they are people and within that there are women.

Q: What do you think is the biggest challenge for young women in Australian politics at the moment?

The biggest challenge is representation. Right now, we see young women mobilising and calling for change, calling on our decision-makers to listen

to their voices but it's really unfortunate that we don't see young women in those decision-making spaces to ensure that our issues are being put on the table from our perspectives and our own lived experiences. That's the biggest barrier.

Q: As a champion of young Australian voices, what do you think young people expect from their leaders? Ahead of the 2022 elections, what are you hoping to see from the government?

What young people are looking for is for leaders to be open-minded. The fact that there is a pandemic, climate change, and rallies for gender equality and

I don't think the word "listen" has been displayed a lot of the time when it comes to recent politics.

racial justice shows that the environment is consistently changing and what's really important is that our leaders are showing that they are listening. I don't think the word 'listen' has

been displayed a lot of the time when it comes to recent politics. We also need leaders that are more responsive to diverse communities.

As for what I am hoping for in the next federal election; I want gender equality to be one of the top voting issues in this election. Ultimately, it comes down to safety and respect for everyone. The stories we heard last year of horrific sexual assault, including in Parliament House, show that things need to change, and it's my hope that the government commits to changing what is happening on the inside but also changing what is happening on the outside. Gender-based violence is still a deep issue in Australian society and it's up to us to step up and confront these challenges.

Q: We know that facilitating skill development, building confidence, and connecting women through networks boosts women's participation and leadership. How important are female role models and advocates when it comes to young people in the region?

Mentorship has been life-changing for me. One of my mentors is an Asian-Australian woman who works in law, and being able to not just talk about the legal profession but also our experience as Asian-Australian women was really transformative in showing that I'm not alone, that these experiences are not just me, and that there are ways to use this as a strength and also ways to get through the challenges. Being able to use her as a sounding board gave me the confidence that I am on the right track and doing the right thing.

I make a point to support young women who wouldn't have financial opportunities and in spaces where they are not represented. For me, growing up in a family that didn't have that much money, having mentorship was the key to helping me understand spaces that otherwise I just wouldn't know how to navigate. It enabled me to get my first government job, it meant that I could connect to people that I wouldn't otherwise be able to. I would suggest to all of us to be reaching out proactively to young people who would really benefit from having someone to support their ambitions. I also think as a mentor and a mentee, those relationships inspire my advocacy. I just met with a couple of young women who want to start a club for Asian-Australian women at my university and as they were talking, I realised I'm getting inspired by this because this is an initiative that can truly change young women's experiences at university.

Q: On your website, you mention wanting Australia to become a global leader in intersectional policymaking with a parliament that truly reflects the diversity of our communities. Where are we now and what remains to be done to make this vision a reality?

We are seeing more and more feminist NGOs step up to the plate and use intersectionality as a guiding

When we have leaders that are not from the younger generation or aren't young women, they necessarily have a different understanding of issues that we care about.

framework. The board that I am sitting on, YWCA Australia, uses intersectionality as a guiding principle which is exciting and encouraging. We are not seeing that reflected in the Federal Government right now. If you look at the federal budget, it has barely

any mention of diverse women when it issued its women statement about what it planned to do around gender equality. I just think so much more can be done to support women in intersectional diversity. At the same time, it's been exciting to see the Victorian Government implement intersectionality in its domestic violence framework and I'm hoping that's going to be a model that could be replicated in other states. But I think we have a long way to go in considering intersectionality right at the beginning of the policy process. By intersectional, that's only

just to say who are the diverse communities that we should be considering, how will their needs be met or not met under this policy, and what can we do to create the most equitable outcome. I think even though it's still an emerging word, especially in the policymaking process, there's a lot more to go in terms of creating policies.

Q: What impact does having women, especially young and diverse people, in political leadership roles have on Australia's democracy?

It changes our national debate. When we have leaders that are not from the younger generation or aren't young women, they necessarily have a different understanding of issues that we care about. For example, Australian politicians will send out surveys for young people to fill in and it's quite an outdated process for understanding what young people want. I think it's a lot different from having a young person in the room who has the finger on the pulse of what young people are talking about right now. We saw when it comes to matters like school strikes for climate, young people's views are important, and it can help drive that momentum. Or when it comes to things like March4Justice, young women's experience with sexual harassment was crucial given that we are the most likely group to be sexually harassed and assaulted. That lived experience matters and if we don't see it in politics, our policies suffer as a result. It's that unique experience that makes all the difference.

Q: Could having more women in diplomacy benefit our relationship with the region?

I'm currently working with the World Bank and a lot of my work is working with women in the Pacific. I'm realising that as they share their stories, it's so similar to my own experiences. For example, a lot of Pacific women have spoken about how their mothers have inspired the work that they do now or about their experiences challenging traditional gender roles. And I realise that that's also me, so having women in international relations helps us to realise that countries that we are working with aren't just abstract entities; they are people and

within that they are women. Women in this space can bridge these experiences and work together.

It's about using the diversity of our country as a strength to connect with the deeper and more nuanced parts of communities.

The same thing goes for having culturally diverse communities in Australia in the international relations space. We are looking to engage with Asia so we need to have Asian-Australians in the room to talk about

that cultural nuance that we might miss otherwise. It's about using the diversity of our country as a strength to connect with the deeper and more nuanced parts of communities.

Another example of the importance of women in international relations is looking at gender in climate change. Women are disproportionately affected by climate change, including in the Asia-Pacific region. For example, domestic violence rates increase after a natural disaster. If we have more women in diplomacy, we are more likely to recognise the gender implications of issues that we might have missed.

Q: What are the pros and cons of young women having female mentors versus male mentors?

I think in some areas it matters and in some areas it may matter less, but I do think that the value of having female mentors is again shared lived experience, especially in industries that traditionally don't have women. That includes the international relations space. I find that when I speak to women, I ask more questions like what kind of challenges have you experienced? How do you overcome them? How do you embrace your own form of leadership? It's interesting hearing their answers because a lot of the time they have had to push their luck in representation, and they have had to grow their self-confidence in a space that often doesn't look like them. I value that unique perspective. But at the same time, I have had also fantastic male mentors that are there to champion my work and have been some of my biggest supporters. Being willing to engage others who have different experiences is just as important and there's plenty of support out there across genders.

Q: In these difficult COVID times, where social interactions are at a standstill, how can we continue to create opportunities for young women to learn from role models? What does the future of international relations look like for young people as the uncertainty continues?

I would start by saying young people can reach out and they shouldn't be afraid to do so. While the pandemic means that it's harder to meet in person, Zoom has changed the game in terms of who you can speak to. What really made the difference to me as a young woman was not being afraid to just ask, and if you are not afraid to ask, you will be shocked at how many people are willing to give you all the time of day and share their own experiences and help wherever they can. I think turning the barrier of the pandemic into a bit of a strength helps in realising that it's now more accessible than ever to reach out and that people are looking to have meaningful conversations.

In terms of the future of international relations, it's interesting to see how IR is more and more reflecting the current domestic issues of the time. One example is in the US — their foreign diplomacy is actively discussing racial injustice, inequality, committing to creating more inclusion at home and abroad and it's very interesting to see how social movements are connecting the domestic realm with the international relations realm. I think it's the right path to take because if we are dealing with states, these are communities and people with lives and experiences so if we are going to commit to equity and intersectionality, that would make some really interesting politics.

Q: How do you think young women will disrupt the international relations sector in the near future and what advice would you give to young girls wanting to pursue a career in this area?

What I have increasingly seen in Australia is young women starting youth dialogues, which has been interesting to witness. For example, youth leader Hayley Winchcombe founded ASEAN-Australia Strategic Youth Partnership which connects young Australians with young people in ASEAN. It shows the potential that young women have in creating their own engagement. I'm excited to see how young women continue to expand these issues and connect directly with young women across the region.

I love how we have a shared interest in matters of social justice because that collaboration is essential to develop our thinking and what needs to change in our countries and abroad.

In terms of general advice, coming back to what I said in the beginning, realising that the current state of international relations is not set in stone and eventually your contributions will stock up and will create a difference. And it's everybody's contributions and choices that shape who we become. Realising that the international relations system is ultimately a lot of people over a lot of time with different ideas and eventually here we are with this field today. Being willing to say that things can change, being willing to embrace your experiences and being willing to listen to others are powerful ingredients for a better form of diplomacy.

Yasmin Poole is an award-winning speaker, board director and youth advocate.



PART 3
Social
Structures

Trafficked Victims to Cultural Pioneers: Migrant Wives in South Korea



South Korea has a long association with cross-border marriage. Until the 1980s, it was a source country in the international market for feminine care, with young Korean women marrying American military servicemen and migrating to the US.

However, since the 1990s, it has become a destination country, with South Korean men increasingly turning abroad in their search to find a spouse. The number of migrant wives has risen from a few thousand in the early 1990s to more than 287,000 in 2019, with foreign

brides comprising up to 20 per cent of marriages in some rural areas. More than 70 per cent of migrant wives have come from China, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines and Cambodia.

Aside from South Korea becoming a prosperous country, there are cultural factors that explain why large numbers of South Korean men have looked

For men in rural areas, marriage and fatherhood are a rite of passage and associated with male maturity.

abroad to find a wife. For men in rural areas marriage and fatherhood are a rite of passage and associated with male maturity. For mature bachelors, failure to marry leads to a form of disabled manhood, as well as

practical problems around caring for elderly parents in a patrilocal society. Patriarchal and Confucian cultural ties are strong in rural areas where sons are duty-bound to care for family farms and parents, with caregiving responsibilities delegated to the daughter-in-law. However, there is a structural shortage of young women in rural areas, because they have increasingly migrated to urban areas for better educational and career opportunities. In the late 1980s a series of suicides by older farmers who had complained about their inability to find a wife brought this issue into the national spotlight, with increasing media attention on the plight of 'rural bachelors'. The difficulties with finding a wife are not just confined to farmers and fishermen, but rather a broader problem in South Korea's highly competitive marriage market affecting men of low-socioeconomic status, divorcees or with health conditions.

Why foreign marriage became a quick fix

Rather than address the cultural issues that have contributed to South Korea's record low birth and marriage rates, local and national governments have prioritised marriage migration as a quick and easy solution to complex structural problems. Since the 1990s local governments in rural areas have offered financial support to assist male residents with the costs of finding and marrying a foreign bride. National government support for female marriage migration has varied over time. Until the mid-2000s the national government had an 'open door' policy to female marriage immigration and no oversight of groups brokering international marriages. Unscrupulous commercial marriage brokers

and cult-like religious groups took advantage of this system, which led to both South Korean husbands and migrant brides feeling they had been tricked into marriage, resulting in high rates of divorce and domestic violence. South Korean society's sentiment shifted from welcoming migrant wives as 'saviours of the countryside' to broader concerns about 'trafficked victims' of domestic violence and 'runaway brides' taking advantage of naïve bachelors. The problems with marriage migration led to diplomatic tensions as source countries complained to the South Korean government about the treatment of their nationals. The Philippines took steps to block South Korean commercial marriage brokers while Cambodia and Vietnam even went as far as temporarily banning their citizens from marrying South Korean men.

Since the mid-2000s the South Korean national government has increasingly regulated female marriage migration and closed loopholes that allowed commercial firms and religious groups to act as matchmakers with little regard for the welfare of migrant wives. While in the past it was straightforward for a migrant bride to receive a visa without being able to speak any Korean and naturalise after two years of residence, today it is a far more complex and lengthy process. Since 2015, a South Korean national wishing to sponsor a marriage immigrant visa must meet income, character and other requirements. If a migrant bride is from Cambodia, China, Mongolia, the Philippines, Thailand, Uzbekistan or Vietnam, then prior to entering South Korea they must also have a basic level of Korean proficiency and undertake courses that have been described as 'how to be a perfect wife' training. The selection of these countries is justified as based on female nationals from these countries having a high divorce rate, but there is limited evidence to justify their selection.

New services ignore rising domestic violence

The South Korean government has also rapidly scaled up support services for migrant wives under the banner of multicultural family support. 'Multicultural' has a narrow and exclusive definition in South Korea, associated with the assimilation of female

marriage migrants and mixed-race Korean children, while excluding male marriage migrants, migrant workers and refugees. Government spending on multicultural programs has ballooned from two billion won (US\$2 million) in 2005 to 123 billion won (US\$134 million) in 2014. This has led to resentment from many in South Korean society and complaints

The government's response to high rates of domestic violence has been to focus on moulding migrant wives into devoted wives and carers.

of reverse discrimination as multicultural families have been supported better than other vulnerable groups, with 204 support centres for around 300,000 multicultural families, compared with 17 support centres for four million single-parent families.

Despite the government's massive investment in multicultural family support and local government's reliance on migrant wives to sustain their populations, mistreatment of migrant wives has remained a persistent problem. The statistics on domestic violence are alarming, with high rates of migrant wives having suffered domestic violence and seeking refuge at shelters for victims. Even with tight regulations over who can marry a foreign bride, there are still cases of migrant wives being murdered by their spouse not long after marriage. Unsurprisingly the divorce rate among families with a marriage immigrant is higher than the general population, even though many migrant wives will persist with an unhappy marriage. This is because of difficulties navigating the legal process, maintaining residency and obtaining custody of children after separation with South Korean courts favouring husbands in cases of child custody due to their Korean language skills.

The government's response to high rates of domestic violence has been to focus on moulding migrant wives into devoted wives and carers. Multicultural support programs targeted at migrant wives prioritise maintaining the traditional South Korean patrilocal and patriarchal family structure over women's individual empowerment. Through immigration, education and welfare policies the South Korean state attempts to define the identity and role of migrant wives as maternal caregivers devoted to their children, husbands and in-laws. Upon arrival, marriage migrant women are encouraged to attend

Multicultural Family Support Centres (MFSCs) catering exclusively to migrant wives and their children, where education programs can last several years, and participation is linked to residency and naturalisation. By comparison, South Korean husbands are only required to attend a four-hour class that has been criticised as racist and rationalises the mistreatment of migrant women.

One size doesn't fit all

Rather than blaming victims and approaching the problem of mistreatment of migrant wives as a protection issue, what is needed is a paradigm shift in the way South Korean governments and society approach migrant wives and multiculturalism. Instead of treating migrant wives and their husbands as a homogenous group with one-size-fits-all solutions, customised support should be provided to couples recognising the diversity of backgrounds and experiences. As an example, Filipino migrant wives are on average more educated than their South Korean husbands, come from a culture where it is common for women to head households and have a desire to find work to fund remittances to family in the Philippines. They are unlikely to readily accept South Korean forms of patriarchy and abandon ambitions of working. Instead, customised support that helped Filipino wives achieve their ambitions while helping husbands to understand Filipino cultural perspectives could be a more effective form of support than current programs solely targeted at migrant wives. One simple form of support could be bilingual mediation and couples counselling, reflecting that there is often a language barrier inhibiting communication between migrant wives and their South Korean husbands and in-laws, which can accentuate cultural differences.

Greater support is needed for men who marry a foreigner. Extensive cross-cultural education prior to marriage should be mandatory for husbands so that they attain a good knowledge of their wives' culture. After marriage, husbands should be provided ongoing support in navigating their relationship and negotiating marital problems. Immigration and legal systems require reform as they overwhelmingly favour the husbands in cases of marital breakdown, leaving migrant wives fearful they could lose custody

of children if they attempt to separate or divorce. This means some wives in abusive relationships are left with the stark choice of either enduring violence or fleeing to their origin country.

While it is well known that there are large segments of South Korean society opposed to multiculturalism, it should also be acknowledged that migrant wives and their children are also uncomfortable with being labelled and stigmatised. The word

Migrant wives and their children are at the forefront of changing the notion of what it means to be South Korean in the 21st century.

multicultural (*damunhwa*) in South Korea has connotations of poverty and racial hierarchy, with an emphasis placed solely on the assimilation of minority groups. Racial minorities in South Korea also would like to see an overhaul of multiculturalism. What is urgently needed is changing society's mindset that

multiculturalism is a one-way street where minorities should adapt and greater acknowledgement of the harm done by generations of ethno-national education that have fostered the notion that race, nationality and culture are indivisible.

One of the country's most pressing challenges is its ageing population and cultural norms that often mean the elderly are isolated, with an alarmingly high elderly poverty rate of 43 per cent. Cultural factors mean that there can be stigma and awkwardness attached to the elderly asking for help and for those who are not related providing care.

Migrant wives are not inhibited by these cultural problems and could be mobilised to check-in and provide paid care for elderly South Koreans at risk of social isolation and poverty, who may feel less inhibited in accepting assistance or being checked on by migrants.

Migrant wives and their children are at the forefront of changing the notion of what it means to be South Korean in the 21st century. There are several examples of individuals who have broken through social barriers to be trailblazers in politics, entertainment and other fields. If government policy worked to shift rather than reinforce ethno-nationalist attitudes, greater space could be created for migrant wives and their children to recognise their full potential.

Stella Jang was a 2021 Korea Foundation Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Sydney.

How to Fix China's Population Crisis: Say Sorry to Women



We have been writing and warning for years about the Chinese government's one-child policy and its disastrous long-term effects on the country's population and society.

It feels like we have been documenting the melting of glaciers; a calamity, but a slow-moving one. For the past six years China moved swiftly from a one to two to three-child policy — only to be met with plummeting birth rates. Every marker of demographic decline is a reminder of why regulating family size by force is a human rights disaster.

In January the Chinese government announced that last year the country only added 480,000 people and the birth rate dropped to 7.5 per 1,000 people, the lowest in decades. Meanwhile, the percentage of older people has steadily risen, with people aged 60 or above accounting for nearly one-fifth of the population. For the first time since the great famine

of the Great Leap Forward in 1961, China's population could contract this year, with fewer births than deaths, all of which is causing labour shortages, pension shortfalls, and a host of social problems.

How should the Communist Party address this crisis?

China isn't the only country trying to raise sagging birth rates — but it is by far the only country to have shed so much of its population without war or pestilence. It did so through the introduction of the one-child policy, a radical, long-running social experiment that was vicious, inhumane, violated everyone's reproductive rights, and resulted in a wildly uneven distribution by sex. It has led to an estimated 30-million male surplus — roughly an Australia-size population of bachelors — and an age distribution within the population at odds with the country's economic health. As a result, the Chinese Communist Party is now turning to women and exhorting — some say hounding — them to have more children.

In an astonishing about-face, the one-child policy has turned into a “have one more child” policy and then one more, but so far women aren't buying it. The 2016 introduction of the two-child policy did lead to an initial spike in birth rates but, since then, births have dropped every year. Many have cited the high cost of child-rearing as a disincentive, but women — the main focus, target, and victims of the country's whipsawing population planning policies — have also revolted against these latest attempts to restrict their reproductive choices.

Jonathan Swift once wrote a satire on how the Irish famine could be solved by eating children. For the country that has figuratively devoured its young, here is our Swiftian proposal on how the Chinese Communist Party should start to solve its population problem — with a sincere, massive apology to China's women.

Say sorry for blaming them for the country's negative population growth.

Say sorry for violating their rights to make their own choices on marriage, work, and reproduction and, in general, not doing enough to take down patriarchal

Say sorry for blaming them for the country's negative population growth. Say sorry for stigmatising unmarried women in their late 20s by calling them “leftover women.”

systems that put the burden for having more children and caregiving squarely on women's shoulders.

In March, for example, the Jiangsu provincial authorities partly attributed their negative population growth — occurring for the first time since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 — to “the significant increase in women's educational level.” The tone of the announcement — as if women's education is to blame for China's population problems — riled many. “So, no more foot-binding, but brain-binding now?” a netizen commented on social media platform Weibo.

While Chinese women are more educated than ever, workplace gender discrimination keeps holding them back from achieving their full potential. In China, differences in mandated parental leave — mothers can get up to six months of maternity leave, while paternity leave is at most 30 days — have encouraged discriminatory practices by employers, and reinforced harmful gender norms. With China's weak workplace protection laws, many companies are openly expressing a preference to hire men or women who've already had their children, as Human Rights Watch research shows.

Since the 2016 lifting of the one-child policy, numerous women have described being asked about their childbearing status during job interviews, being forced to sign contracts pledging not to get pregnant or being demoted or fired for being pregnant. A recent college graduate said all five companies that she interviewed with asked about her marriage and childbearing plans, and three of them told her that they would not offer her the job if she wanted to have a child. A mother of one child was asked to sign a contract promising that she would not have a second for at least three years as a condition for a job offer. A woman was fired days after she informed her employer that she was pregnant. The list goes on and on. While Chinese law bans such discriminatory practices, it provides few effective enforcement mechanisms, leaving victims with inadequate avenues for redress.

While the goal of the two- and three-child policy is to encourage, not discourage births, it's still the same story as the one-child policy in the sense that women end up being punished for their fertility, one way or the other.

You might ask how could the CCP saying sorry help China's population crisis?

Well, it might not do a lot to spur births. But the government's long history of restricting women's right to reproductive choice and bodily autonomy through abusive, and sometimes violent means has instilled a deep fear and suspicion among many women in China that genuine attempts at reparation – however unlikely this might be to happen – would help alleviate.

One cannot begin to build happy families in a miasma of fear, suspicion and rage.

Above all, the Chinese women are owed profound apologies for the extensive and inhumane acts committed against them during the one-child policy years, when the authorities subjected countless women to forced contraception, forced sterilization, and forced abortion, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s.

The steps needed to implement an apology

Genuine contrition doesn't stop at words.

The state should also urgently take practical steps to end gender inequality in all areas of society, including the workplace and home. In addition to meaningful measures to prevent employment discrimination, the government should end discriminatory parental leave

The stick has failed; this is what a carrot might look like.

policies, expand parental leave and protections for those who take it, ensure availability and affordability of childcare and other forms of

professional caregiving, and provide equitable access to health care for pregnant women and their children. The stick has failed; this is what a carrot might look like.

Another easy solution to increase the birth rate is to allow people who are not traditionally parents to become parents, but this isn't something the Chinese government has demonstrated a willingness to do. Children born outside of marriage still face fines and denial of access to public services, and same-sex unions are not recognised. Single women are denied access to egg freezing procedures and in vitro fertilisation, with the justification that these

technologies could “instill unrealistic hope in women who might mistakenly postpone childbearing plans.”

A quick recap: Shortly after the CCP took power in China in 1949, Chairman Mao Zedong encouraged population growth to create manpower. As a result, China's population nearly doubled in 30 years. Then in 1979, to curb population growth and ease environmental and natural resource challenges, the Chinese government introduced the 'one-child policy,' limiting most couples in the country to just one child. The policy was crafted by military scientists, men of course, who believed any regrettable side effects (see those listed above) could be swiftly mitigated, and women's fertility rates easily adjusted. This resulted in horrors including no-birth periods, such as from May to August 1991 in Guan and Shen counties in Shandong province, where all pregnancies were forcibly aborted, during the “Childless Hundred Days” campaign.

For 30 years, parents across the country who resisted complying with the one-child policy were harassed, detained, and had their property confiscated or houses demolished. Authorities often levied enormous fines on families who violated the policy, forcing them into destitution. Children who were born outside of the one-child policy were denied legal documentation. As a result, until the hefty fine was paid, these children were unable to obtain an education, healthcare, or other forms of public services.

One of us, Yaqiu, was born as the third child of her family. Her mother hid in relatives' homes, dodging government officers who tried to take her away for a forced abortion. But Yaqiu's family was still impoverished by the huge fine imposed on her life. As her mother often joked to Yaqiu growing up, “We even had to sell the broom in order to afford you!”

The one-child policy created an estimated 30 to 40 million “missing women” and fueled a demand for trafficked women and girls

The Chinese Communist Party also owes a fervent apology – and full reparations – to the women who have been trafficked to fill the female shortage caused by the one-child policy. Coupled with China's traditional preference for boys, the one-child policy

created an estimated 30 to 40 million 'missing women' and fueled a demand for trafficked women and girls,

spurring a business in selling humans in countries across [Asia](#) and within China.

One of the most pernicious examples of this is Xiahuimei, a mother of eight who had been found thinly clad and chained in a shed. Many in China were shocked to see such medieval conditions on the eve of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, at a time when authorities could employ high-tech means to make snow, survey crowds and censor dissent. Authorities initially tried to cover up the issue, but in the face of public outrage, arrested several people, including her husband, for trafficking. Authorities said Xiahuimei had been bought and sold several times since 1998, but she is just one of many. Human Rights Watch has [documented](#) survivors who were sold for between US\$3,000-13,000, repeatedly raped, and often forced to leave behind children fathered by their buyers, a source of great pain.

It is not only lower-income women who bear the brunt of the country's reproductive policies.

In its bid to raise birth rates, the Chinese Communist Party has been placing curbs on divorces and abortions, narrowing women's choices — another thing to say sorry about.

Since 2020, the Chinese Communist Party has been making divorce harder with a law establishing a mandatory 'cooling-off period' of 30 days for couples who apply for divorce-through-agreement. Women's rights activists warned that the law could disproportionately harm women, including endangering women experiencing domestic violence, as women initiate three-quarters of divorces. The forced 'cooling off' appeared to have worked, as government statistics showed a steep drop in divorce filings in 2021. But some experts said the drop might also be due to pandemic restrictions that made scheduling divorce appointments more difficult.

The government is also stepping up efforts to reduce abortions. In September 2021, the State Council,

China's cabinet, in its "Chinese Women's Development Guidelines" for 2021-2030, identified "reducing non-medically necessary abortions" as a step toward women's development, one more example of its continued attacks on women's reproductive rights. In April, the state-controlled newspaper *People's Consultative Conference* said in an article, quoting expert opinion, that "parties responsible for unsuitable abortions" should be "severely punished."

A disaster that could have been avoided

The sad truth is, there was no real justification for the one-child policy's painful measures. The Chinese Communist Party sought to rationalise it as a crucial step to revitalise its economy and defuse a population time bomb. But a full decade before the one-child policy, China already had the 'Later, Longer, Fewer' family planning policy that had halved family sizes successfully, using less coercive tactics. Many demographers believe China could have slowed population growth and turbocharged its economy without resorting to the one-child policy's extreme methods. After all, in roughly the same period China's one-child policy was in place, birthrates in South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Thailand also plunged. Now, these countries are also trying to raise birth rates. But they don't have to deal with problems on the scale of what China faces, with human trafficking, a demographic tsunami, and legions of lonely men and traumatised women. To have inflicted all this suffering unnecessarily is truly something to be sorry for.

Mei Fong is chief communications officer and Yaqiu Wang is a Senior China Researcher at Human Rights Watch.

Engaging Men in Preventing Domestic Violence



There are growing efforts in the Asia-Pacific to prevent and reduce domestic violence, and one significant aspect of this work is engaging men in prevention. To be effective, prevention initiatives must address the patterns of masculinity, understandings of violence, and ideologies of gender common in the Asia-Pacific.

The primary prevention of domestic violence involves strategies intended to prevent initial perpetration or victimisation. While secondary prevention efforts

are addressed to those at risk of using or suffering violence or already doing so, primary prevention aims to prevent violence from occurring in the first place.

Primary prevention aims to change the social conditions – the social structures, norms, and practices – that support and promote domestic violence. Well-developed prevention frameworks such as the Australian [Change The Story](#) framework highlight the ‘drivers’ of violence that prevention efforts must address, including patterns of male domination, dominant forms of masculinity, rigid gender stereotypes, and other factors.

In violence prevention and related fields, there is a growing emphasis on ‘engaging men’. This has a [compelling rationale](#). First, while in many regions most men do not use domestic or sexual violence, when this violence occurs it is perpetrated overwhelmingly by men. Second, particular constructions of masculinity play a crucial role in men’s violence against women and girls. Third, men have a positive role to play in helping to stop violence against women.

[Programs and strategies aimed at men and boys](#) thus are one significant stream of prevention activity. Seven trends are visible in this ‘engaging men’ field. First, work with men and boys is increasingly well established, through significant initiatives, groups and networks. The field includes promising initiatives from the Asia-Pacific region, as we explore below, and increasing [guidance on implementation](#). Work has been supported by [MenEngage](#), a global alliance of over 1,000 organisations from over 80 countries, including its regional networks such as [MenEngage South Asia](#).

Prevention work with men and boys is supported by a growing body of scholarship demonstrating its effectiveness. [Scholarly reviews](#) document that well-designed interventions can shift the attitudes and behaviours among men and boys that otherwise may feed into domestic and sexual violence.

Four further trends are visible. First, programs and strategies aimed at men – whether in relation to violence prevention or related areas such as workplace gender equality, parenting, and reproductive health – have increasing support through both international commitments and state and national government policies. Prevention frameworks such as [Change The Story](#) show an increased focus on engaging men and challenging harmful forms of masculinity.

Second, the work itself is growing in scale and sophistication. Third, there is growing attention to [diversities among men](#) (related to class, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on) and growing articulation of a [gender-transformative approach](#). Fourth, the work uses an increasing range of strategies. While many programs rely on face-to-face education or communications methods, there is also increasing implementation of community mobilisation, organisational change, and policy development. Finally, there is expansion in the domains in which violence prevention work with men takes place, including [parenting and family life](#), [conflict](#) and [post-conflict](#) settings, and [online](#) spaces.

A pattern of power and control

The term ‘domestic violence’ refers to violence perpetrated by a person against their intimate partner or ex-partner. Much domestic violence is by men against women, and the term therefore overlaps with terms such as violence against women and gender-based violence. [Domestic violence](#) often involves a range of harmful behaviours: physical and sexual violence, social and economic control of one’s partner, and psychological and emotional abuse. It is characterised by a systematic pattern of power and control exerted by one person (usually a man) against another (often a woman), involving a variety of physical and non-physical tactics of abuse and coercion, in the context of a current or former intimate relationship.

In considering domestic violence in the Asia-Pacific region, it is challenging – perhaps impossible – to discuss a region as geographically, culturally, socially, and politically diverse as the Asia-Pacific without oversimplifying or glossing over some of this diversity. Our intention, therefore, is to discuss some broad stroke ideas that we think are relevant to the region whilst making no claims to a comprehensive discussion.

Socio-cultural constructions of masculinity in the Asia-Pacific, as in Australia, exist along the lines of patriarchal norms, values and practices. Academic research, as well as reports from civil society organisations, have shown that men typically understand their role in society to align with rigid gender stereotypes. For instance, in [South Asia](#),

masculinity is largely imagined as characterised by physical and mental strength, sexual virility and prowess, being the family’s breadwinner, competence and command, and aggression and dominance. Similarly, in [Indonesia](#), discourses of masculinity centre around concepts of honour and hierarchy between genders in ways that privilege men. As with many postcolonial societies, these conceptualisations of masculinity in Southeast Asia are strongly influenced by the history of European [colonisation](#) in the region. Recent research from [China](#) shows that key elements that constitute dominant constructions of masculinity include decision-making, toughness and physical power, using violence to defend one’s reputation, and compulsory heterosexuality and sexual prowess. In [Australia](#) too, traditional, patriarchal notions of manhood continue to shape men’s ideas of their role in society. As a practice firmly rooted in patriarchy, it is no surprise then that domestic violence is a serious and widespread problem in [Asia-Pacific](#), as well as [Australia](#).

To challenge and end men’s violence against women, it is important to consider the different ways in which such violence is understood. First, gendered expressions of violence by men and boys are often perceived as ‘boys being boys’, thereby minimising the violence and its impact. An example is the dismissal or minimising of men’s sexual harassment

of women as ‘[eve teasing](#)’.

Second, men’s violence is mostly considered noteworthy only in cases of extreme physical violence such as rape-murder.

Third, violence is

considered to be an individualised phenomenon limited to a few ‘bad’ men. Finally, domestic violence is often considered a ‘[private family matter](#)’.

Challenging such problematic ways of thinking about men’s violence against women requires acknowledging that more extreme examples of such violence, for example physical brutality and sexual assault, are manifestations of the same patriarchal ideology that underpins men’s routine gender practices. Such everyday practices include domestic work and caregiving labour that disproportionately burden women in [Asia-Pacific](#) and [Australia](#).

Patriarchal structures will need to be fundamentally transformed

There are many socially accepted practices too, such as [dowry](#) and [son preference](#), which contribute to the patriarchal discourse that empowers men and disempowers women. Men’s violence, being an integral aspect of patriarchal social and institutional structures, cannot be eliminated while these other markers of the same ideology remain intact. Patriarchal structures will need to be fundamentally transformed in order to enact meaningful change in men’s violence against women. This also necessitates thinking outside the reductive binary of ‘good vs bad’ men, and recognising the pervasive and everyday nature of harmful patriarchal practices.

Promising work with men and boys in the region

There are promising instances in the Asia-Pacific of work with men and boys at every level of the [spectrum of prevention](#), the levels from micro to macro at which prevention can take place. One of the most common forms of prevention activity is community education, typically in the form of face-to-face workshops. For example, in Sri Lanka, men are engaged through male peer groups to reject notions of patriarchal power in families. In Vietnam, an online [educational entertainment program](#) aimed at sexual violence prevention is being developed for young men at university. Work is particularly well-developed in India, with education groups for [boys](#), [young men](#), [male university students](#), and [adult men](#) used to decrease their agreement with gender-inequitable and violence-supportive norms and engage them as allies to women. If they meet [established standards for effective practice](#), respectful relationships and consent education programs are valuable tools for primary prevention.

Education programs aimed at males often take place in school or university settings, but some address other populations, such as fathers, or other settings, such as sports. In Indonesia, [an evaluation of MenCare](#), a global campaign to promote men’s involvement as equitable and non-violent fathers and caregivers, found positive change in participants’ attitudes and behaviours. In India, a program delivered by coaches to boys in cricket had [mixed impacts](#).

Another common form of prevention activity involves social marketing and communications. In Bangladesh, a [campaign against acid violence](#) engages boys and men through media materials, male celebrities, and school sessions. In Papua New Guinea (PNG), the [Men of Honour campaign](#) aims aimed to break the cycle of violence by focusing on positive behaviour. In India, “[Bell Bajao!](#)” (Ring the Bell!) calls on men to challenge violence against women through bystander intervention in intimate partner violence, and [evaluation shows](#) significant increases in awareness and understanding of domestic violence among those exposed to the campaign.

Primary prevention also involves work with professionals and practitioners. In Pakistan for example, the non-government organisation Rozan has [worked with the police](#) to develop their capacity to address violence against women.

[Community mobilisation](#) involves bringing individuals and groups together through coalitions, networks, and movements to broaden prevention efforts. In Fiji and the [region](#), the [Male Advocacy Program](#) recruits, trains, and mobilises men as advocates for violence prevention. In India, [Ek Saath Abhiyan](#) engages men and boys in active partnership to change gender discriminatory norms. In India, Men’s Action to Stop Violence Against Women (MASVAW) focuses on men’s roles in building gender equality and ending gender-based violence, using community workshops and mobilising men as advocates in their communities. The alliance’s [achievements and challenges](#) are a rich case study of both [the promise and the challenges](#) of engaging men in change.

The most macro level of primary prevention is to do with law and policy. The need for violence prevention to include efforts aimed at men and boys is emphasised in Australia’s national government strategy, a step that other countries in the region could emulate. This emphasis was visible in the first [National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children](#) (2011), and receives stronger emphasis in the draft second National Plan, due for release soon. The National Plan endorses primary prevention interventions that support men and boys to have respectful and equal relationships, the promotion of healthy masculinities, and engaging men in leadership positions.

Issues, principles, and the way forward

As the ‘engaging men’ field develops, articulations of the principles that should guide this work have emerged, including international frameworks by [UN Women](#) and [International Center for Research on Women](#), [guidelines on funding programs](#), and [policy frameworks](#). Violence prevention efforts in general should be evidence-based, comprehensive, engaging, and relevant to the communities and contexts in which they are delivered, as [handbooks](#), [toolkits](#), and [other guides](#) emphasise. In [working with men](#)

Prevention policies and programs should be feminist or gender-transformative

and boys in particular, prevention policies and programs should be feminist or gender-transformative, that is, intended to transform gender inequalities.

They should be committed to enhancing boys’ and men’s lives, and they should be intersectional, addressing diversities and inequalities.

[Key principles](#) for violence prevention work with men and boys recently were launched by the Regional Pacific Women’s Network Against Violence Against Women and UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office. They emphasise seven principles for best practice. Be accountable to the women’s movement. Do no harm. Be grounded in a human rights-based approach. Be evidence-based and evidence-building. Be inclusive and intersectional. Be gender transformative. Be informed by context.

Men who wish to contribute to ending domestic and sexual violence and [become allies](#) to women’s anti-violence work must start with themselves, ensuring that they treat the women and girls in their lives with respect and equity. They need to reflect on how they participate in, and benefit from, patriarchal systems and structures even if they do not personally perpetrate domestic and sexual violence. This work

Becoming an ally requires men to take action in support of gender equity and justice.

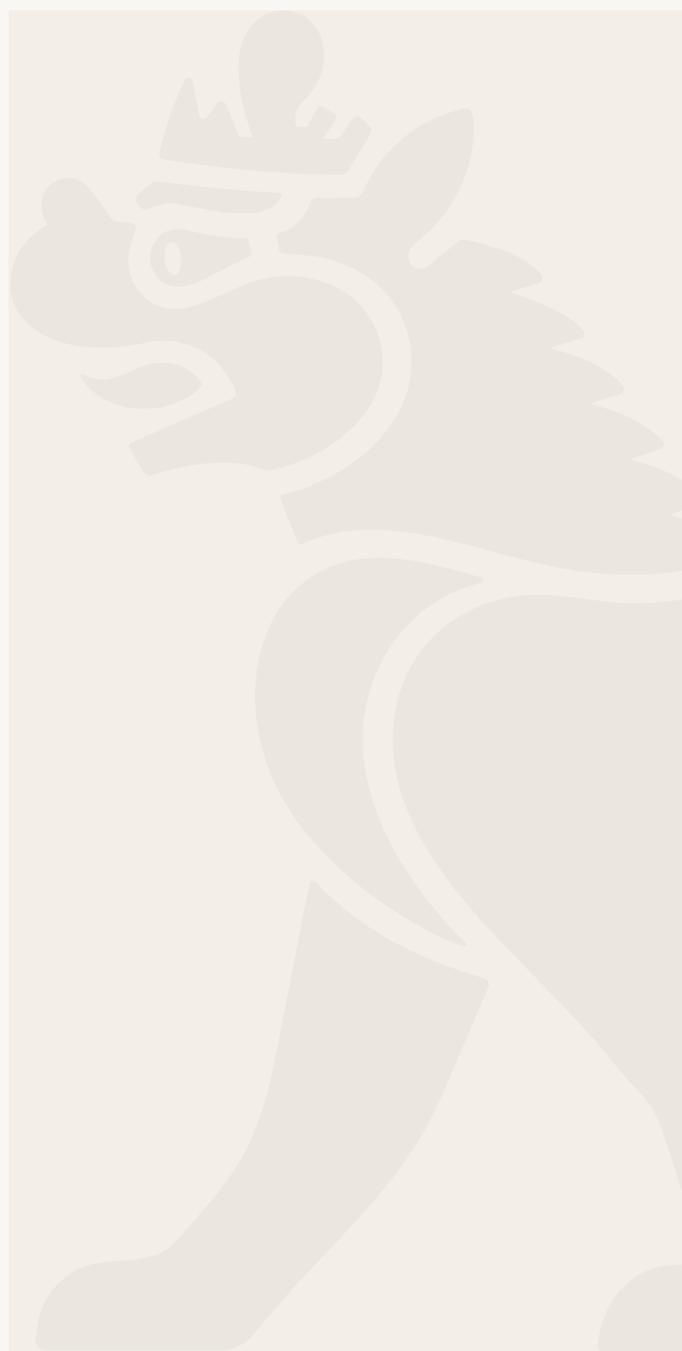
requires a genuine commitment to eroding their own gender privilege as men in pursuit of equity. It also involves men allies to acknowledge that while patriarchy acutely hurts

women and people of [diverse gender identities](#), it also costs men and boys dearly in terms of their [physical, mental, sexual, and social health and wellbeing](#).

Crucially, becoming an ally requires men to take action in support of gender equity and justice. However, it is important to do so in ways that amplify women's voices and respect women's leadership in anti-violence efforts. A minimum and necessary requirement of anti-violence work is to go beyond lip service in the form of performative allyship and move towards real change at personal, interpersonal, institutional and systemic levels.

Efforts to prevent and address domestic violence and sexual violence must include strategies and initiatives aimed at men and boys. While there exist several examples of promising efforts in this space in Asia-Pacific and Australia, these initiatives are usually small-scale and sporadic. Moving forward, it is vital to establish clear standards and guiding principles for this work as well as to intensify and scale up these initiatives targeting change at micro (individual, interpersonal) and macro (community, policy) levels. Recognising men's violence as not an aberration but an expression of the patriarchal gender order, these anti-violence efforts must exist in conversation with broader gender justice initiatives and seek involvement of women's organisations, networks, and peak bodies. Finally, active community engagement and ownership of such efforts are necessary for them to be achievable and sustainable.

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Gender Inequality and the Ultimate Resistance of Women in China



The emergence of a market economy in China means women have achieved unprecedented levels of educational and professional achievement.

But they are also suffering widespread gender violence and discrimination, as well as oppressive gender norms legitimised by both the culture and authority. While women, especially young women have embraced feminist movements in their quest for social transformation, China's traditional

gender power structure remains stubborn with implicit support from a powerful government. However, this patriarchy is also facing a crisis as more and more women are consciously making autonomous decisions about their lives.

Progressive women and discrimination

China's economic rise has come at the expense of many women, including those who were dismissed from state-owned enterprises in the 1990s, those working cheaply for the emerging processing industries, women who have been dispossessed of their land due to urbanisation, and mothers who have been abused by the family planning campaign. The progress of Chinese women is thus a story of surviving as a by-product of economic development, fraught with the influences of class, region and ethnicity.

Women make up more than half (53 per cent in 2020) of Chinese university students and graduate with better performance. They continue to maintain a high share of the paid labour force (nearly 70 per cent in 2020) and a significant share of economic contribution (41 per cent in 2015). Academia and the emerging services economy offer the greatest opportunities for women to achieve professional success. For instance, the percentage of women referred to as “senior specialists and technicians” in national statistics reached 38 per cent in 2016. Official statistics also indicate that the proportion of female entrepreneurs in the internet sector reached 55 per cent in 2019.

Many institutional barriers stand in the way of women's advancement, for example, gender discrimination in hiring is taken for granted.

Despite the government's ban on employers knowing information about marital and maternity status in 2019, no employer has ever been revealed as receiving a penalty for non-compliance in the last three years. Despite the official statistics that the

Culture can be very coercive, especially when the government endorses it.

incidence of spousal violence against women has declined significantly since the enactment of the 2015 Anti-domestic Violence Law, multiple feedback from victims and civic organisations indicate that too often domestic violence is denied by the authorities, especially police and courts.

Among the 'feminine duties' that the dominant Chinese culture imposes on women, one that is particularly persistent is that women should marry and have children at the 'appropriately' young age and assume full moral responsibility for caregiving.

Such domestic requirements work together with gender discrimination in the workplace to form a closed loop of inequality. It should be noted that culture can be very coercive, especially when the government endorses it. China's current top leader has repeatedly and publicly asked women to follow “family virtues” to maintain social stability.

Maximising the extraction of women's intellectual and labour contributions while refusing to compensate them fairly and preserving gender power structures in the pursuit of economic development appear to be in the best interests of those with vested interests. From this perspective, gender equality in China will be perpetually delayed by those in power.

Young feminists awakening and being thwarted

Young women who are well-educated, have access to a wide variety of information, and earn an independent living in urban areas are the most incensed by gender inequality and the most able and willing to resist conforming to gender norms in their personal lives. This is the case despite the fact that many of them also rely on consumption, appearance, and heterosexual relationships for self-esteem. Numerous women have described the 'moral shock' that led them to identify with feminism; the realisation that society was not treating them with the fairness they expected and deserved. Similar to what has been observed in other countries, the immediate cause of the rise of the feminist movement in China was not only the severity of gender oppression, but also the tension between oppression and the growing awareness of women's autonomy. Moreover, if women's demands could have been met through institutional channels, the feminist movement might not have grown as much as it has in recent years.

In a patriarchal society, young women lack the chance to speak for themselves; however, they have come together on the internet to create an alternative collective discourse and activism. The dependence on the internet is also a result of restrictions on offline activities and a lack of resources for feminist activism. In 2010, spontaneous feminist sites emerged on China's earliest social media, and by 2018, when the #MeToo movement took off, feminist-initiated debates were able to attract tens of millions of hits on the most popular social media platforms.

Although the origin and central focus of the #MeToo movement has always been sexual harassment in education and the workplace, it actually encompasses a wider range of issues, along with the leadership of young women and intense feminist critiques. In the first month of the #MeToo movement in China, nearly 10,000 students and graduates petitioned universities for sexual harassment prevention mechanisms, and more than 40 professors and public figures were publicly exposed for sexual harassment in the first year of the movement. The #MeToo movement has been effective in promoting institutional progress, especially in the field of education. The Ministry of Education prohibits professors from engaging in intimate relationships with students, and some professors have lost their jobs as a result of sexual harassment.

The greater achievement of the feminist movement in China, however, is that it has unsettled the public discussion in China as never before by mainstreaming the need for society to recognise and respond to women's demands, even if the response does not favour women. Participating in online public discussion exposes people to a polarised and violent environment, which is especially cruel to women. Ironically, at a time when the Chinese feminist movement had not yet delivered many noteworthy outcomes, it has already sparked an

The potential for feminist advocacy to affect social change is being thwarted.

internet-enabled counter-movement. The active mass base of the counter movement is comprised of young men who feel threatened and deprived by the advancement of women. As a result of

the online backlash against feminists, the term “gender antagonism” became popular on the Chinese internet in late 2020, detracting attention from feminist advocacy.

It is government sectors that authorise and allow common misogyny, posing a significant threat to the feminist movement. The Communist Youth League Central Committee, the youth organisation of the Chinese Communist Party, has publicly accused feminists of “making trouble,” “infinitely magnifying rights,” and “cyber cancer.” Such attacks not only harm the reputation of feminism, but also signal its delegitimisation and mobilise its

expulsion from legitimate public space. From 2018 to 2021, major internet platforms have continued to ban some feminist organisations and activists and censor “radical” feminist expression with increasing severity and depth. Offline, feminists advocating for women's rights have also been subject to harassment, intimidation, and surveillance. These actions indicate that the potential for feminist advocacy to affect social change is being thwarted.

Contradictions on marriage and childbirth

The struggle between women and patriarchal traditions in China is bringing a heightened focus to the role of women within the family. In the midst of an intense debate among feminists, some have advocated publicly for ‘no marriage, no children,’ arguing that women should not embrace marriage, childbirth, and caregiving. There is a growing number of women who are suspicious and even fearful of marriage and childbearing who are not feminists. The age at which Chinese women marry for the first time has risen to 26 in 2020, a significant increase from the previous age of about 24 years. The annual number of marriages in China is also gradually declining. China's total fertility rate fell to 1.3 in 2020 and reached a new low in 2021 after the elimination of all fertility restrictions.

The essence of the reluctance to marry and have children is women's conscious or unconscious nonviolent non-cooperation with patriarchy, which may appear to be passive resistance but has significant ramifications given the significance of women's sex, emotions, fertility, and care provision in maintaining the family and social structure. Besides the attacks on feminists for aiding women, a variety of other measures have been implemented to coerce women into marriage or prevent their withdrawal. In 2017, the Communist Youth League Central Committee established a ‘Marriage Department’ to “assist overage youth in locating mates”. One study revealed that, beginning in the 2000s and accelerating after 2010, Chinese courts have become less inclined to grant divorce petitions filed by women, even in cases of domestic violence, separation, or missing spouse. The National People's Congress insisted in 2021 that the Civil Code include a “cooling-off period”

for divorce, in response to widespread opposition from women. Since the majority of divorce petitions are filed by women, it is suspected that

Is it possible to demand more rights for women using childbirth as leverage?

this provision is primarily intended to restrict women's right to divorce. It appears that the restrictions on divorce have been a double-edged sword, as they have, on the one hand,

significantly reduced the number of divorces, but on the other, have led to an increase in the number of individuals who choose to remain unmarried.

It is already anticipated that a declining fertility rate will result in a shrinking labour force, threatening China's economic development and social welfare. Funding from the government has encouraged scholars to investigate the fertility intentions and motivations of women. But what has been omitted from the discussion of fertility intentions is that inaction on gender inequality, refusal to negotiate change, and increasingly authoritarian controls have severely frustrated women. To date, none of the real fertility incentives implemented by governments at all levels have been effective enough to influence women's propensity to have children. At the same time, the possibility that the government will force women to have children, either directly or indirectly, such as by restricting birth control and abortion, as many fear, has not yet materialised.

Is it possible to demand more rights for women using childbirth as leverage? So far, the calls to do this have had little effect. Negotiating with women or releasing substantial resources to them can lead to an imbalance in the power structure, which the government would not like to see. And on the other hand, using their bodies as bargaining chips is increasingly not an option for women. As a result of the difficulty of the feminist movement as a whole, women's autonomous decisions to not have children or to have fewer children may pose the greatest future threat to the patriarchal state.

Women dismantle the system of inequality

Many have demonstrated that gender equality is crucial to economic and social development. What is often overlooked, however, is that gender inequality may otherwise be crucial to specific economic, social, and political models. Chinese women's paid and unpaid labour contributions have been enormous for decades in boosting the economy, making up for social welfare shortfalls, and preserving family and social stability. The orientation of gender inequality as an institution in China is to maximise the extraction of benefits while avoiding structural change through unequal treatment of men and women. In light of this, it is understandable that China has not yet made encouraging gender equality strides when celebrating the "rising of a great nation." Many Chinese women have joined the feminist movement out of rage and resentment, but the movement is too weak and impoverished to transform the system. However, the collective and individual struggles of women are likely to be lengthy, and non-cooperation may be their last resort for dismantling the system of inequality.

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On the Rise of Asian Australian Women's Writing



To think through the emergence of Asian Australian women's writing is to be faced with the violent racism and exclusion that Asian Australians have experienced since federation.

Tracing a shift in literary landscape is a fascinating way to note wider cultural movements, literature always a kind of mirror, however fractured or fragmented. When I think about the lineages and legacies of Asian-Australian women in literature, it is impossible not to dwell on the violent and racist legislation which has formed and complicated what it means to be an Asian-Australian writer. The White Australia Policy

was one of the first pieces of legislation passed after Australia's federation, perpetuating a white ideal by law. Repealed in 1973, the policy still casts a long shadow on Australia's arts and cultural industries, in particular the literary landscape; for example, many of Australia's major literary institutions were founded before such laws were repealed, such as the Miles Franklin Literary Award, which was founded in 1957.

In such a social and cultural climate, what has been the place of Asian-Australian women in the 'imagined community' of Australia? It is easy to gauge this if one looks at the winners of Australian literary prizes, the endpoint to the production of literary works — from education, through to publication. Aside from a few brilliant exceptions (such as Brian Castro's Vogel win in 1982, or Hsu-Ming Teo's in 1999) it has taken over a century for Asian-Australian writers to receive wider support or recognition in the literary arts.

In 2008, novelist and essayist Alice Pung edited what is now a well-known anthology of essays and fiction titled *Growing Up Asian in Australia* (Black Inc.). The anthology was not published with her original introduction, which was published later, in *Peril* magazine, beginning with an admission that Pung had been persuaded by a "trusted adviser" that her "heavy introduction might not make people want to pick up the book at Borders... Academics and students might be interested in the history of Asian-Australians, but we as a popular culture are perhaps not ready." But, returning to it in 2022, Pung's writing feels far from inflammatory, instead fairly explanatory:

"Throughout Australian literary history, Asians have often been written about by outsiders, as outsiders. Our outside identity oscillates between being a grave threat to white nationhood and being the obedient racial group least likely to offend, depending on the political climate."

Times have changed, and in the fourteen years which have passed, such hesitation to share such histories has been challenged. As the global movements of Black Lives Matter and #MeToo have brought issues of racial and gender inequality to the world stage. These movements grew in a digital age; even within the grip of the algorithm, the rise of social media platforms has enabled a wider range of voices to be heard, and for communities to be formed. Representation in media, film, literature and the arts has also begun to slowly change. What do these social and cultural shifts mean for Asian-Australian literature, and especially writing by a new generation of women writers? Once more we can turn to literary prizes: in 2013, Michelle de Kretser's *Questions of Travel* (2013) won the Miles Franklin; in 2017, Melanie Cheng won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Fiction for *Australia Day*; and in the same year, Julie Koh was named *Sydney Morning Herald* Best Young Australian Novelist for *Portable Curiosities*. More recently,

Jessica Au's *Cold Enough for Snow* (2021) won The Novel Prize, and Eunice Andrada's *Take Care* (2021) is, at the time of writing, shortlisted for the Stella Prize. These books are thrillingly different, spanning genres and themes, refusing to be defined through the ever-shifting label of 'identity politics' so often wielded against minority writers, at best implying a lack of rigour and at worst a lack of art. These writers are talented, rigorous and artful, and are not alone; they join so many others who are working today.

Though I have been asked to write on the rise of Asian-Australian women writers, it is important to note that it is not so much a new trend but rather the result of tireless anti-racist work for many years by many people, across many disciplines. I am thinking here of the Asian Australian Research Studies Network, 4A Gallery, CAAP, *Peril* magazine, Hyphenated Projects, my own *Liminal* magazine, amongst many others, which have championed and made space for Asian-Australian art and writing. It is wonderful to see these writers acknowledged; that such a mood of possibility has been both fought for, maintained, and nurtured. It is bracing to think of the brilliant talent we don't know and will never know: the writers who were refused, erased, elided, on the basis of their race. One can only hope that such literary talent will continue to be supported and championed, and in such a way that mirrors a greater cultural shift.

Leah Jing McIntosh is a critic and researcher, and the Founding Editor of Liminal magazine.

Asia Society Australia has curated a series of excerpts from Asian Australian female writers to illustrate Leah's essay:

She sat on the kerb and cried. A few people perched next to her and rested their hands on her shoulders. Others tried to revive the yellow man, to no avail. Most, however, continued to stare.

Look at how I've swamped your country, she shouted at them. I've been selling all your secrets to the yellow people. Your secrets of unreliable public transport and circus-like government.

I will kowtow at your restaurant table, lead your men into sin and poison your babies with my cheap synthetic milk and my peasant ways.

Listen hard to what I'm saying, she said, because this is the amazing thing I do with my tongue.

For years afterwards, many locals remarked to each other – in the privacy of their own homes and on talkback radio – that the aggressor in the incident had been the yellow man, and that they were deeply concerned by the oversensitive and inflammatory nature of the woman's remarks, by the weak and hysterical character of her emotional display, and by her ingratitude to a nation that had so generously accommodated her, even though she was a member of such a cruel, meek, blank-faced race.

© Julie Koh, *The Three Dimensional Yellow Man*, taken from *Portable Curiosities*, published by University of Queensland Press, 2021.

As she watched her items being scanned and bagged, Mrs Chan turned her attention to the magazine rack. A sea of women with pouty lips and cascading hair returned her stare. They reminded Mrs Chan of the Barbies her granddaughter had played with as a child. Once, long ago, Mrs Chan had been the local bombshell. But that was in the 1960s, and hers had been a real, unspoiled kind of beauty. Her fair skin and high cheekbones had caused a stir among the neighbours, some of the more jealous ones starting a rumour she had Caucasian blood in her.

There was only one face Mrs Chan recognised amid all the others on the covers of the glossy magazines — a woman with cumquat-coloured hair. When Mrs Chan had first come to Australia, the red-headed woman had been outspoken about Chinese migrants, but thankfully nobody, including the redhead, talked about the Chinese anymore. Now it was all about Muslims — like the pretty girl in the yellow headscarf scanning Mrs Chan's Chinese mushrooms.

© Melanie Cheng, *A Good and Pleasant Thing*, taken from *Australia Day*, published by The Text Publishing Company, 2017.

I went alone to the cinematheque every Wednesday. Walking back, I made myself stride. For a long time after arriving in Australia, my instinct had been to creep and pass unnoticed. Servants walk like that in their masters' houses. It was never discussed in my family, but all three of us were in hiding from something. My father acquired the tic of passing his palm over his face. As for my mother, she developed a problem with her eyes and went around in dark glasses, even indoors. It was pure ostrich magic — not seeing and hoping not to be seen. What exactly had the three of us feared? Nothing/ everything — it was

the fuzzy, underlying immigrant dread of punishment for being in the wrong place.

© Michelle De Kretser, *Scary Monsters*, published by Allen & Unwin, 2021.

It's felt like the same day repeating itself for some time now. I come home around five, Vic gets home around seven. The excitement of our workdays ending merges with Doms' restlessness, finding us in the same position by nine.

Our internal chemical environments mirror our external natural environment. Lethargy reflected in the dry leaves sitting atop my fold-out bed in the corner of the living room, the laptop still attached to the television with a taut cable, the once-novelty, boxed almond milk on the bench.

The rhythm of our schedule of emotions is dictated by the free and almost stylistic disorganization of this condo.

Our bodies may appear to be yeet hay, a term my mother uses to describe the disruption in one's equilibrium caused by hotness, the acidic boiling of blood or hot air present in the body from subtle stressors that cause subconscious anxiety. Depending on the body, these stressors can be spawned from different elements: processed sugar in sauces, the energy of excessive peanuts, the constancy of television, not the smoking of cannabis itself but perhaps the lingering of its cold resin.

This rhythm of living felt exciting and uncontrived at first, like how it feels to be raw. It was our attempt to draw closer to our own skin. But it's been a year now since Doms won the lottery on the cusp of finishing her degree in chemistry and we keep falling into this rhythm. We make up our days as we go, letting our habitat speak for our moods and anxieties. We suppose this must be happiness.

Sometimes Doms and I will walk around the poolside, circling a few times before jumping in. Feet are more sensitive to temperature variations because they're at the ends of us; thresholds for our bodies' heating and cooling. We let our soles start to burn, then jump in, the adrenaline bloating us, the impact collapsing us. It's exciting every time.

© Jamie Marina Lau, *Gunk Baby*, published by Astra House New York, 2022.

How Asian Women are Challenging the Digital Ceiling in Esports



Professional online gaming – or esports – has become a global industry and culture which has grown exponentially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reflecting its phenomenal popularity in Asia this competitive video gaming will be an official medal event at the 2022 Asian Games in Hangzhou, China, and was already featured as a medal event at the 2019 Southeast Asian Games. The International Olympic Committee has also been discussing integrating the activity into the Olympics. Unlike traditional sports, physical differences such as body build and muscle

mass do not directly affect performance in esports and, thus, it can include both females and males. Nevertheless, so far esports remains a largely male-dominated sphere, much like traditional sports normalising males as the majority players. Yet while males outnumber females in many gaming genres and tournaments, female gamers are on the rise, especially in Asia.

As a leading region for the birth and growth of esports, Asia has the largest number of players and fans in the world. Occupying more than 54 per cent of the global esports market, Asia is expected to account for 50 per cent of all esports viewers by 2025. Recently, the growth rate of female gamers in Asia has far exceeded the average growth rate. Representing 38 per cent of the total 1.33 billion Asian gaming population, approximately 494 million female gamers live in major Asian countries, including China, India, Japan, and South Korea. Female representation is rapidly becoming one of the important features of the activity in Asia and is leading its industrial growth and game profits. In fact, much of the income in the Asian game market comes from female gamers,

Women in esports are frequently evaluated based on their appearance.

as they are becoming key consumers of the industry. The rise in female esports players in the region attracts even more female fans and viewers, leading to larger sponsorship and

endorsement returns. For instance, in 2019 and 2020, MAC China partnered with the popular Tencent mobile game *Honor of Kings*, one of the highest-grossing mobile games. The campaign included a collection of products, such as lipsticks, that sold out in a day. In addition, the growth and expansion of women's esports led to the rise of women's teams and tournaments throughout the region.

When female gamers are too good

Despite these developments, sexism and gender imbalance are still widespread in esports. Female gamers frequently encounter negative – often sarcastic and violent—reactions and comments in gaming communities. South Korea's Kim "Geguri" Se-yeon, who became the first and only female *Overwatch* professional gamer in 2016, is a prime example. As a member of the amateur *Overwatch* team UW Artisan from South Korea, she competed in the Nexus Cup qualifying games. After the match, multiple male players from the opposing team accused Geguri of using aim-assist software during the game, and she had to prove her innocence through a live demonstration soon after. The incident was actually

neither new nor surprising because such doubt of female gamers is common. When a woman is good at gaming, others often suspect that a man, such as her boyfriend or male sibling, is playing instead of her. Such an accusation stems from the sexist prejudice that women lag behind men in their gaming skills. Geguri previously said that she had considered using a modulator to alter her voice so that male players would team up with her. Even if a handful of women manage to break through the glass ceiling and become professional players, they are often confined within the limited perception that they are good players "for a girl". Indeed, what happened to Geguri was not because she was too good at playing games, but because she was a woman. Women in esports are frequently evaluated based on their appearance. By streaming herself playing *Overwatch* in a monitored studio, Geguri demonstrated her gaming prowess to fans and other players, but at the same time, the sexual objectification of her appearance was rampant in the comments. Scrutinised by a male-dominated gaze, Geguri's unconventional femininity was denigrated and ridiculed, concluding that she was an inauthentic woman.

Women's struggles in and out of the gaming space

Research has shown that women – whether casual gamers, professional esports players, or high-profile streamers—experience online harassment much more often than men within the game space. In order to protect themselves from sexual abuse, bullying, and even rape and death threats by trolls and misogynists, many female players conceal their gender by changing their profiles, disguising their voices, or simply turning off their microphones while gaming. Wealth inequality is another struggle that female gamers confront in their gaming experience. In such an androcentric environment, female gamers get paid far less than male gamers. According to a study of the highest-earning esports players, no woman has ranked in the top 300 earners. Canada's Sasha 'Scarlett' Hostyn is the world's highest-earning female player, but she is ranked 367 with career earnings totaling US\$415,691. The stunning gender pay gap becomes explicit in proximity to

Johan 'Notail' Sundstein, a Danish male gamer whose income surpasses US\$7 million as the highest-earning

Nearly 80 per cent of lead characters in games are male.

esports player in the world. When narrowed down to Asia, Chinese Li 'Liooon' Xiao Meng is the highest-earning Asian female player with

US\$240,510. In contrast, the highest-earning Asian male gamer, Syed Sumail 'SumaiL' Hassan from Pakistan, has earned about US\$3.8 million.

Gender-based discrimination is also evident in the available game characters, where the proportion of female characters has been very low. According to a recent study analysing more than 100 games, nearly 80 per cent of lead characters in games are male. Even among the small number of female characters, most of them are often represented in a hypersexualised way. Whereas men are typically portrayed as gigantic muscular heroes with broad shoulders, women are shown with a slim figure but large breasts and buttocks with exposed arms and legs. Such bifurcated, unrealistic gender representation – based on the industry's marketing, which appeals to the male fantasy—reinforces gender stereotypes and the sexual objectification of women.

Creating new gaming femininity

Although it is hard to ignore the ongoing damaging representation of women in games, some strong, independent, girl-crush-causing female characters do exist within the androcentric culture, such as Chun-Li in *The Street Fighter*, Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider*, and Ellie and Abby in *The Last of Us*. Yet female fans are not still satisfied with the female characters in games, especially as the last two characters, Chun-Li and Lara Croft, are often understood as hypersexualized women. Zarya in *Overwatch* is a new strong woman character who is storied as “one of the world's strongest women, a celebrated athlete who sacrificed personal glory to protect her family, friends, and country in a time of war”. Her unique femininity, with short pink hair and a muscular body, has the potential to redefine gaming femininity, disrupting the hegemony of the gender binary in online gaming communities and more. In order to continue to diversify female characters and construct a safer place

for women, it is also essential to have more female game developers. According to a 2021 survey, 30 per cent of game developers were women compared to 61 per cent being men. From 2014 through 2019, the numbers have barely shifted from approximately 20 per cent, so the recent rise to 30 per cent could be seen as a stride. However, in addition to game developers, the current game industry needs more women, people of color, and LGBTQ people as professional gamers, hosts, managers, designers, animators, virtual reality specialists, and so on in order to change the status quo in which toxic geek masculinity runs rampant.

Asian women disrupting androcentrism

Envisioning a more inclusive and diverse gaming environment, Asian female players have been making meaningful moves. In addition to the previously mentioned Geguri and Liooon, players like Xia 'Axx' Bi, the world's first female Dota 2 player to compete in the *Dota Pro Circuit* (DPC) system for a major qualifier, and Li 'ViVi' Wei, the first woman to compete in the World Cyber Arena, have contributed to securing and expanding women's space in the game community while inspiring future generations. In addition to the professional players, Asian game companies are making efforts to create an inclusive industry. For example, the Singapore-based first female esports organization Callisto Gaming garnered US\$500,000 in seed funding in 2019 to establish a ground for female gamers in Southeast Asia, where its own gaming boom is occurring. In the same year, dating app Bumble partnered with Gen.G, an esports organization founded in South Korea, to sponsor Team Bumble, an all-female *Fortnite* team. Last year, Female Esports League (FSL) organized all-female *Valorant* tournaments, Southeast Asia's first ever *Valorant* tournaments for women. FSL is Southeast Asia's premier female gaming circuit;

It is also essential to have more female game developers.

it provides a sustainable platform for female gamers and is considered one of the most prominent female esports organizations in Asia. Although there are

some negative opinions that all-female tournaments could be limited to fighting against gender inequality in esports – as women lose the opportunity to

perform at the highest levels alongside men while the prize pool for all-female events is frequently far smaller than those in ungendered tournaments – such a formation undoubtedly serves to spotlight talented female gamers. In response to a concern about the isolation of female gamers, hosting a mixed-gender tournament could be another route to reach out to more female gamers who want to compete, just as Bandi Namco Entertainment's 'Bonnie and Clyde' tournament aimed to do. The Japanese multinational video game publisher created a mixed-gender tournament where esports teams consist of one man and one woman.

I have named only a few of the efforts in Asia to create a welcome gaming environment for women. Far more exist. Encouraging females to get into esports not only makes women visible in this male-dominated arena, but also lets the world know that esports is for everyone. As new female role models emerge in the digital era, women in the gaming industry could play a significant role in inspiring other girls and women to be more empowered, motivated, and confident. Not surprisingly, Geguri was named one of *Time Magazine's* 'Next Generation Leaders' in 2019. The increased representation of Asian women, in particular, could help invite other minorities into new social spaces that have been difficult to enter, including gaming communities. In building meaningful initiatives to create an equal and inclusive environment, Asian women are at the forefront.

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Lena Duchene and Greg Earl

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