

Executive summary

Gender equality is not just about economic empowerment. It is a moral imperative, it is about fairness and equity, and includes many political, social and cultural dimensions. With a special chapter on gender issues this volume of *Society at a Glance Asia/Pacific* illustrates the progress that many economies in the Asia/Pacific region have made towards gender equality in education and shows that girls outperform boys in some areas of education. But these gains have not yet fully spilled over to the labour market: women are most likely to work under vulnerable employment conditions, earn less than men, are less likely to make it to the top of the career ladder, and continue to bear the brunt of unpaid housework.

The economic case for gender equality

Over the past 50 years, increased education accounted for about half of economic growth across the OECD, and that had much to do with more girls achieving higher levels of education and achieving greater gender equality in the number of years spent in education. Economic development in the Asia/Pacific is also related to the ongoing gains in educational attainment, perhaps nowhere as dramatic as in Korea, where the population is now among the highest educated in the world. To avoid wasting years of investment in educating girls and young women, it is important to make the most of the talent pool and ensure that men and women have an equal chance to contribute both at home and in the workplace, thereby enhancing their well-being and that of society.

Education participation continues to improve...

Education participation continues to improve across Asia/Pacific. Almost half of the children in the region now participate in formal early childhood education and care (ECEC) facilities, and most economies have won the battle to provide primary education. But the picture is more mixed at secondary and higher education levels, with participation lowest among girls in Pakistan. In contrast to most OECD countries, there are still more men than women who have completed tertiary education, and gender gaps in education are most noticeable in low-income economies across the region. Policy also needs to keep a firm eye on ensuring the continuous improvement of the quality of education.

... in some economies the first focus must remain on getting and keeping girls in school

In developing economies, poor families may not be able to afford to send all their children to school and boys may come first. Certainly when primary schooling is made free, and supports with school meals and learning materials exists girls' attendance rises. In low-income economies the first focus must still be on getting and keeping girls in school, ensuring that schools and associated transport are safe and that sanitary facilities are provided. And education is the gift that keeps on giving – mothers who have had schooling place higher value on education for their own daughters.

Many Asian students outperform their peers in OECD countries, and yet many girls do not choose to pursue engineering or science degrees

In some areas of the Asia/Pacific region adolescent students already outperform many of their peers in North America and Western Europe. According to the 2012 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an evaluation of competencies in reading, mathematics and science, on average boys and girls in Australia, Hong Kong (China), Macau (China) and Shanghai (China), Japan, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand and Singapore perform better than the OECD average in all three subject matters. Girls clearly outperform boys in reading competency, and on average are very close to boys' scores in mathematics and science. In Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand girls on average perform at least as good as boys or better in all three areas. And yet girls are still less likely to choose scientific and technological fields of study. Such decisions are taken very early in life, so one answer should be to focus more attention on gender stereotyping and changing attitudes at home, in schools and in society more generally.

Gains in education have narrowed labour market gaps but many challenges remain

Gains in educational attainment contribute to narrowing gender gaps in labour force participation, and in most economies gender pay gaps have declined. However, important gender differences in labour market outcomes remain, notably in Southern Asia and the Pacific islands, with women most likely to be found in the most vulnerable employment conditions. In low-income economies the vast majority of women work informally in the agricultural sector, while in advanced economies they are most likely to be in service sector employment. Compared to men, women in the Asia/Pacific region are less likely to progress in their careers, with the share of women among legislators, senior officials and managers around 25% and declining since 2005. By contrast, women carry out most of unpaid work, providing care to children, elderly, and sick or disabled family members as well as doing other unpaid household work. In the Asia/Pacific region the gender gap in unpaid work is about three hours per day, and such gaps are particularly large in Southern Asia.

There is scope to develop women entrepreneurship

Furthermore, the number of female-owned and run businesses is less than half than the number for men, and women are more likely to be involved in setting up new businesses often without much financial gain in the start-up period. Across the Asia/Pacific region about 40% of men and women hold bank accounts with a financial institution. Clearly, there is considerable potential to develop female entrepreneurship and its contribution to inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

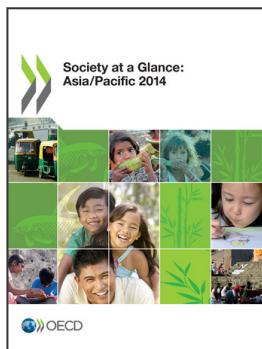
Governments have an important role to play

Governments have an important role to play in promoting gender equality, not just by monitoring the gender dimension when crafting and evaluating policies, but also by ensuring equality of opportunity in the public service – with the government acting as a role model for other employers. Governments have also made efforts to introduce policies like paid maternity leave, parental leave and childcare support, but often coverage is limited or otherwise take-up, especially by men, is low. Change is not always easy, and it takes time for fundamental attitudes to shift in response to changing realities. The OECD Gender Recommendation provides principles for such change in the area of education, employment and entrepreneurship that may be of use for policy makers in Asia/Pacific now and in future. Today's economies need all available talent to ensure a sustainable and prosperous future and to deliver better lives for all.

An initial glance at social protection suggests that despite progress, there is a need for scaling up and broadening social protection systems in most of the economies in the Asia/Pacific region

This issue of *Society at a Glance* also includes chapter drafted jointly by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development (OECD) on social protection spending. For the Asia/Pacific region it finds that on average across the region social spending is around half of what it is in Latin-America (12.5% of GDP) and about a quarter of what it is in Western Europe (25% of GDP). Economic growth has often outpaced social spending growth, also in middle-income countries. Spending on social insurance benefits for (current and former) formal and public sector workers accounts for around 60% of total spending on social protection across the Asia/Pacific regions but active labour market programmes only make up 5%. Social assistance type payments only account for about one-third of social protection spending in Asia and the Pacific, but cover 60% of all those who receive social support, albeit at low benefit levels. In general, there is a need for scaling up and broadening coverage of social protection systems in most of the economies in the Asia/Pacific region.

Finally and traditionally this issue of *Society at a Glance Asia/Pacific*, presents indicators along 25 socio-economic topics which cast light on societal change in the region grouped in five broad groupings: general social context, self-sufficiency, equity, health and social cohesion.



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