

INSIGHT

# Smart Strategies for Getting More Women into the Workforce



A study shows women who undertake vocational training are more likely to join the labor force. Photo credit: ADB. *Here is what works: quotas, training, skills matching, mobility, and childcare leave policies.*

## Introduction

Women in Asia are on average 70% less likely than men to be in the labor force. This gender gap persists despite steady economic growth, increased access to education, and the desire of most working-age women to become employed.

The current gender imbalance in the workforce in Asia and the Pacific is a misallocation of talent that limits productivity and curbs economic growth. Estimates show that the removal of gender bias in education, the labor market, and the household in a typical Asian economy would increase per capita income by 30% and aggregate income by 6% over a generation.

A recent Asian Development Bank study, *Female Labor Force Participation in Asia: Key Trends, Constraints and Opportunities*, examines the factors that have prevented women from entering the workplace and outlines a range of policies to reverse the trend.

## Analysis

The study presents findings from four countries—the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, and Pakistan—that together account for close to 28% of the world’s working-age women.

Each of the four countries has low or declining rates of female participation in the workforce. In the PRC, 64% of working-age women are employed, down from 73% in 1990. Indonesia’s rate is comparatively high for the region but is still only 51%. Female labor force participation in the Republic of Korea remains at a low 50% despite high levels of economic growth and per capita income. And in Pakistan, while on the rise, the female participation rate sits at just 25%.

So what accounts for these stubbornly low or declining participation rates?

Study data suggest there are several prominent constraints to female labor force participation in the four countries. These include a wide range of social and cultural norms that emphasize women’s domestic responsibilities, limit mobility, restrict the subset of jobs considered appropriate for women, and impede women’s access to information.

The study observes five important patterns in the data.

- A large proportion of women currently out of the workforce desire to work but are constrained by various social and cultural norms.
- Proportionately fewer women enter the labor force than men, and they tend to retire earlier.
- In the PRC, Indonesia, and Pakistan, higher or intermediate education levels are associated with lower female labor force participation, as a woman’s choice to work may be related to income level, other household income, and social stigma and norms.
- Female labor force participation is higher in rural than in urban areas, with the difference partially attributed to women’s participation in unpaid work on family-run farms
- Working women experience occupational segregation and lower pay when doing the same work as men

## Insights

How can policymakers boost female participation in the labor force?

- Introduce job quotas that counteract the negative effects of discrimination, provide incentives for women to acquire skills, and allow them to act as examples that will challenge beliefs about their productivity and suitability for certain kinds of work.

- Provide vocational training. Data from Indonesia reveals that women who undertake vocational training are more likely to join the labor force.
- Develop job matching services to help women find opportunities, receive career counseling, increase their employability and social networks, and learn how to bargain for better working conditions or wages.
- Put in place policies on parental leave, childcare or flexible hours to reduce the limitations that domestic responsibilities place on female labor force participation.
- Facilitate mobility, such as female-only transportation, to provide a socially acceptable way for women to travel between work, school and home.

## Resources

ADB. 2015. *Women in the Workforce: An Unmet Potential in Asia and the Pacific*. Manila: Asian Development Bank.

J. Kim, J. Lee, and K. Shin. 2015. *A Model of Gender Inequality and Economic Growth*. *ADB Economics Working Paper series*. Manila: Asian Development Bank.

S. Tanaka and M. Muzones. 2016. *Female Labor Force Participation in Asia: Key Trends, Constraints and Opportunities*. *ADB Briefs No. 71*. Manila: Asian Development Bank.



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Prior to her appointment to the Inspection Panel, Imrana was Asian Development Bank's Principal Social Development Specialist (Gender and Development) from 2010 - 2017. She was elected a Commissioner on the Geneva-based International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) in 2006 and served on the commission's Executive Board. A lawyer by profession, she is the author of the "Law for Pacific Women: A Legal Rights Handbook," architect of the Fiji Family Law Act 2003, and a founding member of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement.

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Last updated: December 2016