

# COVID-19 Crisis and Women in Asia

Economic impacts and policy responses

Peny Rahmadhani, Fiona Vaz and Rizki Amalia Affiat



# **COVID-19 Crisis and Women in Asia**

## **Economic impacts and policy responses**

Peny Rahmadhani, Fiona Vaz and Rizki Amalia Affiat

# Contents

---

List of tables and figures	ii
Executive summary	iii
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Gender norms and economic vulnerability</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in Asia</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Women's leadership in pandemic mitigation and recovery</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Conclusion and policy recommendations</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>20</b>

## List of figures and tables

---

Figure 1	Labour force participation in 14 countries, female and male persons aged 15–64, 2018–2020	7
Figure 2	Female workers with vulnerable employment in Asia, 2020	8
Figure 3	Gender composition of ministers of health, finance and social welfare, 14 countries, 2020	15
Table 1	Labour force participation of women in some sectors and gender-responsive policies during COVID-19 pandemic	12
Table 2	Gender composition of COVID-19 task forces in 14 countries	16

## Executive summary

---

Women's vulnerability to the COVID-19 crisis is exacerbated due to their life conditions. A desk review of available literature examined the connection between gender norms and structural factors that contribute to the precariousness of women workers and women from vulnerable groups, such as migrant workers and refugees.

Gender norms that decide who does what appear to affect not just women's burdens but also policy responses from governments – they seem to be blind to the conditions of women or, at the very least, work to maintain women's status as secondary earners. Although gender norms, structural challenges manifested in the political economy and policies influence financial outcomes for women, the knowledge of these norms and structural constraints could be used to deliberately reduce the negative impact on women.

This research looked at the gender composition of decision-making committees and bodies in government and found a small number of women in them which limits diversity in perspectives. But it also perpetuates the belief that women cannot assume decision-making

roles. Although women's labour has been used during the pandemic to assuage communities and will help rebuild communities after the pandemic, women continue to be denied power to make decisions. Transformative policies are needed to integrate policy support, legal protection and state investment into the interconnected sectors of industry, agriculture and services. Increasing the numbers of women in economic activities must be encouraged, among other interventions. Women entrepreneurs should be provided with financial support, while care infrastructure should be provided to women workers to enable them to contribute effectively to the economy. Inclusion of women in decision-making bodies to reflect the diversity of the pandemic-affected communities could bridge the effort between women-led community and grass-roots initiatives. Last, the urgency for governments, the private sector, international organizations and community organizations to create transformative and integrated policies centred on a people's approach, which includes women's active engagement, would create a more resilient future for society in an increasingly crisis-prone era.

# Introduction

---

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated regular life and widened existing cracks in society. The contagious nature of the SARS-CoV-2 called for lockdowns as an urgent measure to impose social distancing norms to slow down its spread. The closures shuttered schools, workplaces, public transport and recreational spaces like shopping malls, movie halls, hotels and restaurants. It affected business activities, such as travel, local fairs and trade shows, as governments moved quickly to stop the gathering of people. The lockdown measures brought about mass displacement of migrant labourers, acute shortage of daily essentials, violence within homes, aggravation of mental health conditions, burdening of health care systems and a devastation of earnings and financial health. All crises affect excluded groups more than others, and initial reports that have emerged from civil society organizations, research groups and even the media show that the crisis is indeed negatively impacting women and girls more. In fact, the pandemic may reverse decades' worth of gains that movements for gender equality have made (Lewis, 2020). The lockdowns and closures have seen a vast number of women's livelihoods impacted directly and could potentially undo years of financial growth.

The informal sector supports millions of workers in any economy, and many of them, for multiple reasons explained further on, are women. These labourers who are engaged in jobs like construction, transport, small and medium-sized businesses, domestic help and care work or are employed by the gig economy most often migrate to cities where these jobs are available. Although fewer women might be primary breadwinners among the migrant community, they join their husbands or families in cities taking up informal jobs or taking care of their household and children. The lockdowns and closures, which were sudden in some countries, meant that migrant labourers had to return to their native places—often in rural areas, facing hardships along the way. Migrants who decided to stay back in cities confronted financial, emotional and social challenges (Abdul Azeez and others, 2020; Che, Du and Chan, 2020; Liao, 2020), which were not adequately mitigated by the State. Those who returned to their village experienced stigma and/or hardships. The historian, Ramchandra Guha called the migrant exodus in India the biggest human-made tragedy since independence (Guha, 2020), requiring several humanitarian organizations, civil society groups

and individuals to come together to provide help to displaced people.

Women's economic empowerment is crucial for gender equality and to help them gain equality in many ways. Apart from enabling them to make significant life choices for themselves, such as moving out of an abusive home and relationship, they also make choices on educating their children and investing in their own and their children's nutritional needs. Women's labour participation can draw attention to make workplaces and work conditions more equitable and humane for all, as previous feminist movements have demonstrated.

This research looked at the economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic on women in Asia to understand what effects have manifested, the policies that have been enacted by states to alleviate the difficulties and the role of women's leadership in building a post-pandemic society. Three questions guided the research:

- (i) What has been the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in Asia?
- (ii) What gender-sensitive policies, if any, have been enacted to benefit women?
- (iii) What is the relationship, if any, between women's formal leadership and gender-sensitive policy planning and implementation?

These research questions built on each other and centred women's economic well-being and agency. To examine these areas, we gave special consideration to the plight of women with a lower position in the economic hierarchy. Our research prioritized the experiences of women who are disadvantaged because of their intersecting identities as poor, lower caste, minorities or migrants. The jobs they are engaged in are not stringently regulated by the State and leave workers in precarious and often exploitive work conditions. This research involved a literature review only and concentrated on finding similarities and differences among Asian countries.

In this paper, we use a feminist perspective in understanding the gendered dimension of the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic. Of particular concern is the disproportionate economic hardships of women who engage in the labour market. We cover industries that are feminized and among the most disrupted, including small-scale family businesses and

seasonal agriculture labour. The gendered dimension of the crisis also applies within the home, where women have experienced the pandemic-increased burden of household and care work. The gendered distribution of domestic labour generally causes conflict in negotiating between work and family for women; this pandemic has exposed them to a more vulnerable situation of income or job loss. We also explore the amplified vulnerabilities of women living in challenging economic backgrounds, difficult political situations or security environments, such as migrant workers and refugees.

Last, we take a deeper look at the policies adopted by countries and evaluate how the gender composition of policymakers could have influenced the architecture of the pandemic recovery. The study concludes with some suggestions for state actors as well as for civil society groups on how all can come together to create a stronger, more regenerative post-recovery world. Paramount in the feminist approach is that it promotes human well-being as the centre of policy response (Bahn, Cohen and Meulen Rodgers, 2020). This creates the need to address the impacts of the crisis on women's health and mental situations because of their disproportionate presence on the front lines and increased rates of domestic violence, which this study does not cover.

We hope this research helps consolidate existing research and data and supports decision-makers in effectively addressing the financial challenges that the pandemic has brought upon women in Asia.

# Methodology

## Feminist and intersectional

We adopted a feminist approach to this study. Feminist research is not just research about women but is research for women (McHugh and Cosgrove, 2004). It encompasses any non-gender-specific area to bring about a change in gender social relations. Feminist research eliminates sexist bias in research for information, prioritizes the voice of people who are marginalized and endeavours to create social change. Our research spotlighted the challenges that women have faced during the pandemic, be it destruction of their livelihood, loss of income or exposure to the risk of contracting the virus. With our analysis, we draw attention to how gender norms simultaneously encourage women's heightened participation in these areas and continue to keep work conditions precarious. We hope that the research inspires more women and feminist leadership in planning and creating post-recovery options to sustain the gains that movements for gender equality have made thus far, instead of regressing, as some of the early research has demonstrated it is doing.

Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional approach posits that women's multiple identities make them vulnerable to different types of risk based on those diverse identities. Hence, the difficulties faced by women from minority religions, ethnicities or poorer households are far greater than women who belong to more privileged classes and groups. It is thus important that women and other excluded groups' identities are closely evaluated to determine what might hinder their life outcomes and, at the same time, privilege them. In conducting research with an intersectional lens, this means asking what factors might be impinging on a woman's well-being, apart from her gender identities, and defending the most vulnerable position (Lutz, 2015). The intersectional identities that emerged in our research derive from gender, region, social identity, ethnicity and economic background. All of these have come together to show that women are not a homogenous group but have multiple differences and resulting needs that must be met. Incorporating intersectionality as a critical lens could present a challenge in policymaking because it involves a unique and complex process of acknowledging the diverse identities and experiences that do not fit into neat categories and thus are dynamic and open to revision. Nevertheless, a greater incorporation of intersectionality

is a useful method in promoting people-centred interventions in the manner that it can encourage the creation of specific evidence that is applicable within the social context of affected communities.

The particular challenge to our intersectional approach is the limited, or rather, unavailable data that should encompass a quantitative component of different ethnicity and gender identities and other social and cultural backgrounds relevant to understanding how women in the 14 countries we analysed have been affected by the pandemic crisis. Going further with intersectionality would require a more in-depth and focused study, and this research by nature of its methodology limited its scope with the concepts of gender norms and women's triple roles, which we elaborate further on. What we have done allows the acknowledgement of intersectionality present as an inclusive, yet not homogenous, part of women in vulnerable groups and sectors across 14 countries in Asia.

Our research also relied on Caroline Moser's (1993) *Women's Triple Burden* to examine the roles that women have in developing societies, depicted across categories of productive, reproductive and community work. The productive role is associated with income-earning activity in paid cash or wages or production of goods and services for other people (Fajarwati and others, 2015). In the productive sphere, strong gender norms often do not equip women with leadership skills and professional specialization that enable them to have higher-earning capacities (McLaren and others, 2020). Women often undertake work outside the home as secondary income earners. This could be work in the formal or informal sector or even work as entrepreneurs without any employees. These small enterprises are commonly seen in Asia, where women might not fit into the job market but are able to sell some produce through stalls. The reproductive role includes the daily work of taking care of children or older persons and the household, which are essential to ensure the maintenance and reproduction of labour within the family domain but is often non-monetized and discursively hidden (McLaren and others, 2020).

The third and final kind of labour is that women spend time on community management, where they contribute to fulfil community needs as managers, while men tend to be involved in community leadership roles



associated with increased power and status. Women's role in community is characterized by the extension of their reproductive role (Fajarwati and others, 2015), such as maintaining social activities and building solidarity, which are often seen as voluntary and less essential.

These roles that women have are interrelated, with the reproductive roles considered natural to women and leaving them little time to pursue paid work. Policy planners and employers often do not view women's engagement in the labour market as important and undervalue their contribution by paying them lower wages or limiting their growth opportunities. At the community level too, women's labour is relied on in rebuilding communities, but they are rarely seen as decision-makers, which is assumed to be the domain of men. Throughout this paper, we use the framework to show which role of women that policymakers have prioritized while planning relief measures or how these burdens have excluded women's participation in decision-making roles.

### Scope and methodological approach

The research entailed a literature review of the economic impact on women in Asia due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the literature review, we analysed evidence from datasets and other sources of information related to the research questions. To highlight how the crisis has affected women differently, 14 countries (divided among three subregions) were selected to assess how the socioeconomic impact varied between them:

**South Asia:** Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan

**Southeast Asia:** Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam

**East Asia:** China, Mongolia, South Korea

In conducting the literature search, relevant and representative country-level data and sources were tapped. These consisted of academic databases and grey literature (working papers, reports and policy documents) produced by governments, multilateral agencies, think tanks and non-government organizations. Media, such as news coverage, selected features, commentaries, articles and press releases, were also included to provide a comprehensive view of efforts and response, especially from the grass-roots level.

**Narrative synthesis** is used for this paper to describe and compare the dominant themes of women's economic vulnerabilities and the strengths and limitations of existing policies as well as to highlight women's initiatives during the crisis across the 14 countries. The overall analysis uses gender as a focus. It elaborates on the gendered differences in risk areas and presents recommendations to enhance the existing policies to respond to the immediate practical and strategic needs of women. Despite being disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and that their roles are often invisible and underappreciated, it is women's skills and experience that have contributed to the resilience of various systems, as we will see shortly.

## Gender norms and economic vulnerability

---

As several researchers and thinkers have stated, it is not the innate differences in women and men that affect their vulnerability to disasters and calamities differently but the societal gender norms that exacerbate their vulnerability before, during and after a crisis (McLaren and others, 2020; Bradshaw and Fordham, 2015; Moser, 1993). In fact, Barton (1970) suggested that if there is an increase in violence against women and girls during or after a calamity, one can assume that the violence existed even before the crisis emanated (cited in Bradshaw and Fordham, 2015). We could apply the same logic to the pandemic and lockdown-induced problems, such as if the economic problems faced by women are intense now, they were likely present before the pandemic too. The conditions that result in unequal outcomes for men and women, especially in terms of economic challenges, are many—such as women being employed in low-paying jobs or working in the informal economy.

Owing to their low educational qualifications, women could be unfit for the formal job market, which could lead them to set up their own business. Often, women might not be employed at all nor have a source of income and be dependent on the men within the household for their financial needs. All these issues that predispose women to the challenges of poverty could be due to existing gender norms that, in consequence, prevent women from being economically independent in the first place. In most of the economies in which women's financial well-being has been adversely affected by the pandemic, it could be possible that social security measures were either weak or non-existent to begin with, heightening the negative consequences of the pandemic. Gender norms that prevent women from acquiring quality education, being gainfully employed or perceive them as only secondary income sources to their family could have all lead to their increased financial strains now.

While we explore gender norms and economic vulnerability, we proceed keeping in mind that women in Asia are a heterogeneous group and not all experience gender norms in the same manner. While some might face multiple and severe constraints based on their being women, other identities could intensify or even alleviate the challenges that arise due to gender norms.

Because women's labour force participation is intricately linked with prevalent gender norms, we explore some of these norms in this section. We begin with Moser's (1993) triple burden framework, which delineates the three types of roles that women are expected to handle, thus interfering with their life outcomes, and then outline how each of these roles has been evident during the pandemic.

Moser's framework has been used widely over the years to uncover the triple burdens of labour that women shoulder in their reproductive, productive and community roles. This framework can be used to uncover the kinds of gender norms that govern the labour women and men perform and how these could help in planning relief measures. The triple burdens that women must shoulder are influenced by gender norms because women are perceived to be adept at reproductive labour, such as bringing up children and managing the household, which leaves them little time to take on productive labour or any form of paid employment. This means that women are stuck in reproductive labour that limits their earning potential, or because of their role being perceived as primarily within the household, they are paid less even when they are employed. For example, in Vietnam, television shows implied how women could be happy in the pandemic because their husbands were spending more time at home. This line of reasoning overshadowed any conversations around women's increased workload and instead glorified their reproductive role (McLaren and others, 2020).

Additional demands are made on women's labour during crisis situations in rebuilding communities or lessening the impact of crises, often without giving them any leadership or decision-making powers. All these forms of labour overburden women, leaving them physically exhausted and time poor, which means that they suffer multiple burdens in any crisis.

In this pandemic and various lockdowns, **women's reproductive labour has increased** for several reasons. The closure of schools and workplaces has meant that children and other family members have nowhere to go, increasing family members' demands that need to be met and therefore increasing household chores. These

household chores are often the responsibility of women. In some cases, elderly family members, who are more vulnerable to the virus, have either fallen sick or died, again, increasing the care responsibilities of women. Adding to these challenges, gendered expectations that men are the breadwinners in a family has led several organizations to deprioritize the employment of women, asking them to be furloughed, leave their job or face a salary cut (Hill, Baird and Seetahul, 2020c). These expectations could spiral into women within the households being forced to shoulder additional domestic responsibility due to their waning responsibilities in their work or productive roles. In some cases, the burden of employment coupled with the demands of caring for their home has resulted in women opting out of the labour force or choosing less work, which can negatively affect their growth and success.

**Women's participation in the labour force, or their productive role, has always been considered to be secondary to their primary role as mothers or wives.** Various efforts generally are made to enable women in their reproductive role. For example, a study prior to the pandemic by Balgah and others (2019) on the division of household labour in Cameroon found that women's productive labour had decreased so that they could spend more time in the household because they should "do what they are good at" (p. 8). At the onset of pandemic responses, according to McLaren and others (2020), some governments provided child support in highly feminized sectors, such as front-line health workers, so that women could take on their productive role as health care workers, thus implying that arranging for childcare is a woman's job.

Apart from the gender norms on reproductive labour that have impinged on the productive role of women, there are other factors within the economy that have failed to consider norms that affect women. The lockdowns and closures due to the pandemic have resulted in shocks both at the global and local levels of economies. At the local level, it is the informal sector that has been affected the most. In looking at the migrant crisis in many countries in Asia through a gender lens, one can see how women's productive role was affected too. Some women who accompanied their husbands to urban areas but had a job had to give up that job, face a salary cut or make an onerous journey on foot to their native home (Abdul Azeez and others, 2020; Che, Du and Chan, 2020). Most women who accompany their husbands who are migrants are employed in the informal economy as domestic help. As

the pandemic responses took hold, many women had to let go of their job due to the social-distancing measures. Some migrant labourers, both male and female, who chose to stay in a city during the lockdown experienced severe shortage of money and basic necessities (Abdul Azeez and others, 2020).

Gender norms governing the perception that women are more hospitable has led to the feminization of care roles, such as customer service and front-line health work. Both of these job types increase women's risk of contracting the coronavirus because they cannot be fulfilled remotely. Additionally, female staff, such as female health care workers in India, were unsure of government measures to ensure their safety while on the job (Srivastav, Priya and Hathi, 2020). Government schemes that aimed to alleviate the challenges that women had faced similarly failed to adequately consider women in their productive role. Several women, who had to be repatriated from other countries to their own, were unable to access welfare measures, such as the distribution of food grains meant for women because they did not have the necessary documents that proved they were local residents. Other women, who had only temporarily returned to their native place, possibly in rural areas, were not able to avail of cash transfers that governments made because they lacked a bank account.

Finally, **gender norms also affect the community role that women undertake at times of crisis.** According to Moser (1993), women rarely choose or are given leadership duties in community work, hence contribute to community rebuilding without having any decision-making powers. Take for example the scores of teachers, largely female, who were forced to undertake online teaching during the lockdowns and will continue to have a huge part in mass vaccination programmes but had little say in how teaching could take place during the lockdown (Khanapurkar and others, 2020). Gender norms also determine who is seen as a leader, thus reducing women's readiness to take on leadership roles. However, as Bradshaw and Fordham (2015) pointed out, women are proficient in handling crises because they are accustomed to the lack of necessary resources required for living. Because they lack opportunities to make their voices heard, they might not share the solutions that are useful. Hence, gender norms not only have affected women's economic outcomes during the pandemic but will continue to do so during the pandemic recovery, potentially furthering inequality.

# Economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in Asia

In this section, we respond to the research questions around the economic effects of the pandemic on women in Asia. The findings are presented through the lens of gender norms that govern social relations and labour practices. These findings are founded on the assumption that if the pre-crisis conditions influenced life during the crisis, then actions and decisions during the crisis will have implications for life after the pandemic.

As stated in several sources, pre-existing gender inequalities have contributed significantly to the reproduction of vulnerabilities during and most likely after the crisis (McLaren and others, 2020; Bradshaw and Fordham, 2015; Moser, 1993). The COVID-19 crisis has reflected the existing gendered power and freedom and intensified unfavourable socioeconomic conditions for women. This section begins with a snapshot of women's labour force participation prior to and during the pandemic to highlight how their work has been influenced by their social status during the crisis. Another area of study is unpaid care work

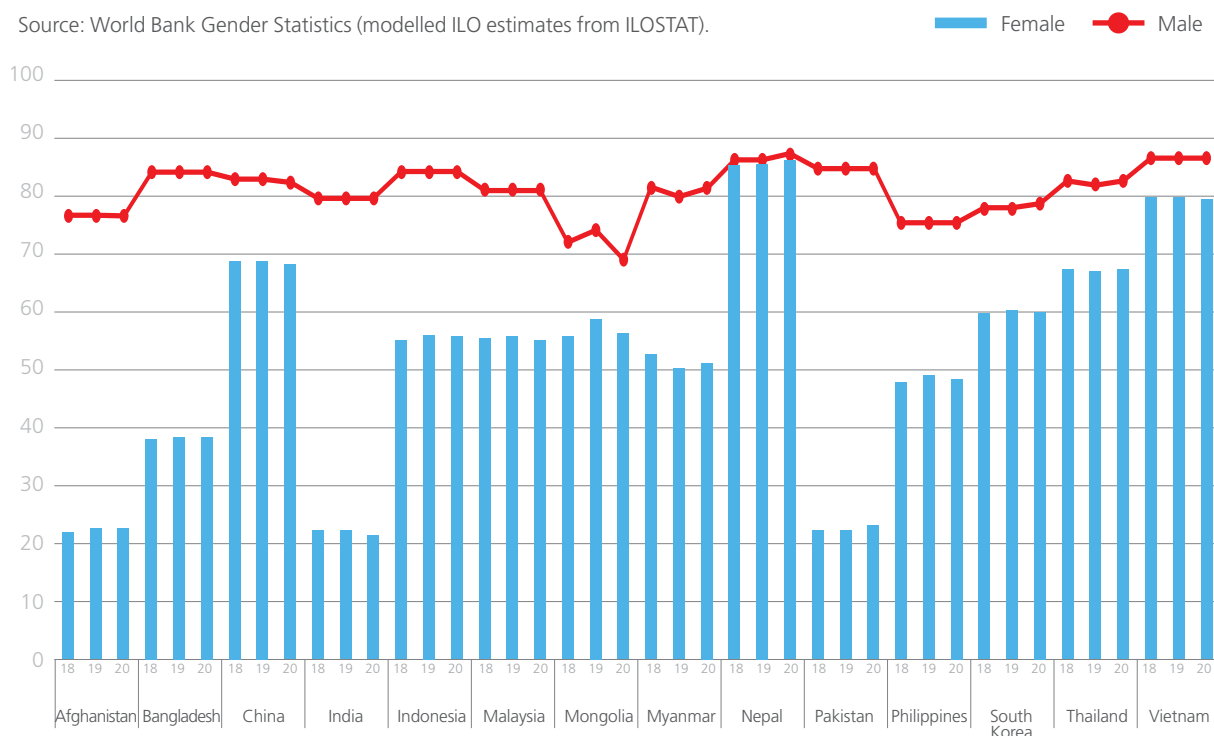
because much of women's productive labour hinges on the responsibilities they accrue within the household. This paper highlights female communities with additional complexities, such as migrant workers and refugees. These themes emerged while we studied the 14 countries. The findings show that women's activities across productive and reproductive spheres remain undervalued and have contributed to hazardous work arrangements during the pandemic that limit their well-being and economic empowerment.

## Labour force participation

The labour force participation rates in figure 1 reflect the proportion of the population aged 15–64 who supply labour for the production of goods and services, including work and first-time job seekers (World Bank, 2020b). The data indicate that **women had relatively lower participation rates than men** before the COVID-19 crisis that have continued.

**Figure 1 Labour force participation in 14 countries, female and male persons aged 15–64, 2018–2020**

Source: World Bank Gender Statistics (modelled ILO estimates from ILOSTAT).



The gender-based labour force participation gaps are most significant in South Asian economies, at 22 per cent on average in Afghanistan, India and Pakistan. In Nepal, despite being in relatively similar income levels, female labour force participation is the highest, at more than 80 per cent, with an average gender gap of 1.3 per cent. This is because women constitute a large part of the workforce in agricultural industries as a result of men's outmigration for higher-paying jobs (OECD, 2014). The low rate of labour force participation in Afghanistan, India and Pakistan could be attributed to women's engagement in family businesses, seasonal work and other informal employment. These forms of work usually have poorly structured wage arrangements that are not often regarded as economic activity, and thus they are not included in national surveys and labour census.

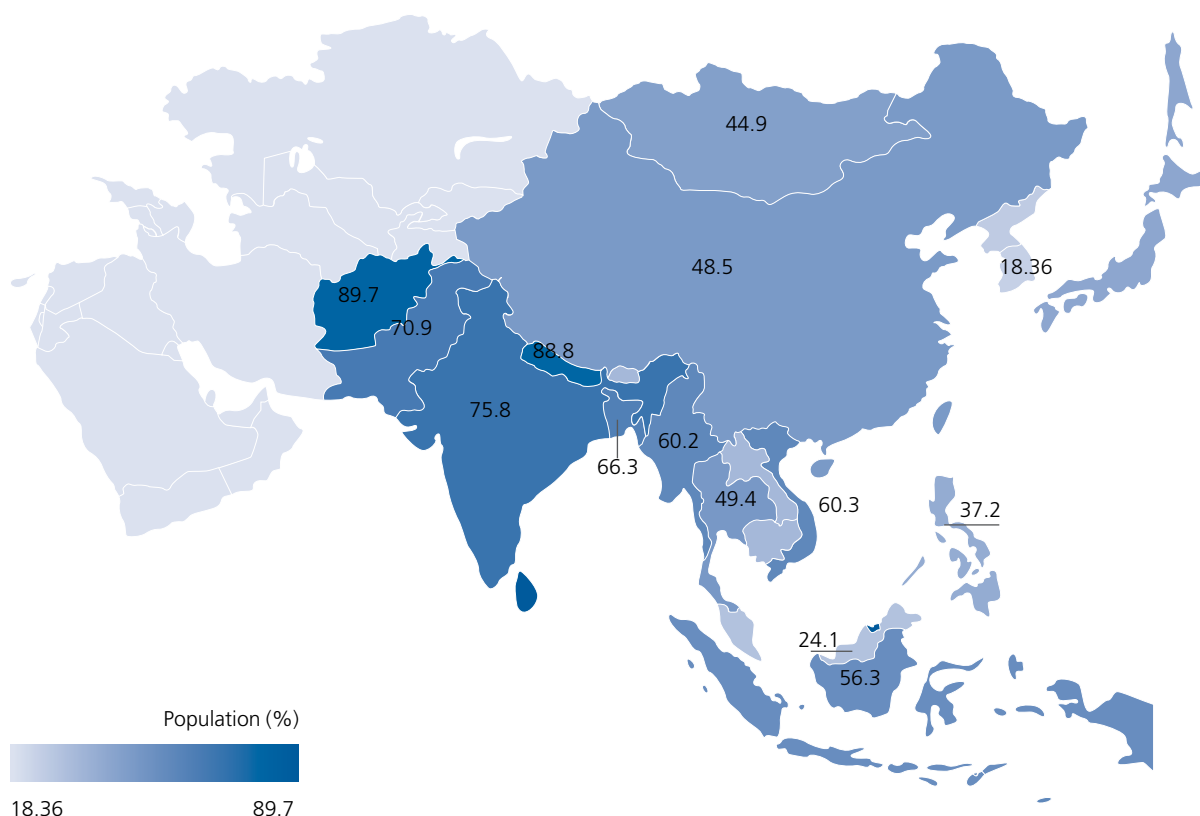
To further explore the participation of women in informal work, the data in figure 2 provide information on the population of women employed in vulnerable employment, defined as self-employed workers without employees (own-account workers) and contributing

family workers, such as unpaid workers in family businesses, farming or the domestic household sector. Vulnerable employment is counted as a percentage of total employment of salaried workers and self-employed groups. As the data indicate, **women in Asian countries are more likely to be found in vulnerable employment**. Women in this category are more likely to work in a small-scale family business (usually agriculture) characterized by indirect payment through family income, weak development, irregularity, job insecurity and unequipped with social protection and safety nets. A large share of vulnerable employment may also indicate a large rural economy and low growth of the formal economy (World Bank, 2020).

Female vulnerable workers account for more than 50 per cent in some countries in Southeast Asia (Indonesia at 56.3 per cent, Vietnam at 60.3 per cent and Thailand at 60.2 per cent). The highest percentages of vulnerable employment are found in the South Asian subregion (Afghanistan at 89.7 per cent, India at 75.8 per cent, Pakistan at 70.9 per cent and Nepal at 88.8 per cent).

**Figure 2 Female workers with vulnerable employment in Asia, 2020 (%)**

Source: World Bank Gender Statistic (modelled ILO estimates from ILOSTAT).



This correlates with the large number of agricultural labourers (see table 1), indicating the fragile situations of informal employment for women in South Asia. Meanwhile, a small number of women in vulnerable employment are reported in countries with a large number of women employed in services (see table 1)—Malaysia, the Philippines and South Korea, indicating better growth of formal employment for women in those countries. **Although women have managed to participate in the productive sphere, access to good- and stable-paying occupations remains relatively challenging.**

Women are overrepresented in the feminized sectors, as shown in the following country findings. Bahn and others (2020) defined feminized sectors as a group of professions or workplaces with a high percentage of female employment that usually includes the front

lines, the end of supply chains, food service, retail and hospitality, which are predominantly associated with poor salary, labour intensive, low skills and precariousness due to lack of formal arrangement for career development and employee benefits (paid time off, health insurance, pension entitlement, unemployment benefits). Because the businesses in feminized industries were severely disrupted by the onset of the COVID-19 response measures, women were among the first groups laid off (Bahn, Cohen and Meulen Rodgers, 2020). This also included small-scale family enterprises and planting, which are dominated by women as employers and/or employees working as part-time or subcontract workers. **In the onset of the crisis, women faced high economic insecurity because they lacked social protection and safety nets to offset the shock of the economic crisis.**

### Country findings

In **China**, there are more women (34 per cent) than men (30 per cent) employed in the manufacturing industries that have experienced trade disruptions, and thus women have been exposed to higher risk of losing their job or having their work hours reduced because the production of textiles, footwear, apparel, telecommunications products, transport equipment, among many others, experienced the largest fall in export growth during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic (WTO, 2020). Women workers faced the same problem in the ready-made garment sector in **Bangladesh** and **Myanmar**, which comprises the majority of total employees: 65 per cent in Bangladesh (UN Women, 2020a) and 90 per cent in Myanmar (IDRC, 2020).

Many women work as temporary workers in retail, service and domestic sectors that are sensitive to downturns in consumer spending, like those in the current crisis. In **South Korea**, the proportion of women workers are 45 per cent of all temporary positions, while that of men is 29.4 per cent (Statistics Korea in Kim and others, 2020). Anticipated long-term inequality is also gendered because people who can use paid leave are mostly full-time regular workers in large companies, and this group overwhelmingly consists of males (World Economic Forum in Kim and others, 2020).

Women account for 44 per cent of informal workers in **Thailand** (UN Thailand, 2020). And 91.8 per cent of working women in **Bangladesh** (UN Women, 2020a) are in the informal sector, which includes vendors, shop assistants, massage therapists, domestic workers and caregivers. They have had reductions of income, no income or unemployment and have been left with limited eligibility to social security schemes and stimulus packages by the government.

In **Afghanistan**, **Pakistan** and **Nepal**, it is quite common for women to work in small-scale agriculture. The travel restrictions and lockdown have affected every stage of the food supply chain, including food production and distribution. The inability to sell their farming products in a timely manner is predicted to cause income loss over the coming months (CARE and Nepal Research Institute, 2020).

The Asia Foundation conducted a rapid survey of a sample of businesswomen at **Mongolia's** Women's Business Center in Ulaanbaatar and found that 30 female respondents were struggling due to revenues drying up to keep their businesses open, keep up with accruing costs and pay employee salaries (Jun and Gerelt-Od, 2020). Women running small-scale enterprises (usually a family business) have faced the same challenges in other countries, such as in **Indonesia**, **Afghanistan** and **Pakistan**.



## Unpaid care work

As Moser (cited in McLaren and others, 2020) pointed out, **women's challenges in the productive sphere interact with additional responsibilities they have in their reproductive role.** The COVID-19 lockdown, which has caused widespread closure of schools, child centres, offices and companies, has reinforced the crisis not only in health and economies but also in care, with women shouldering the load of responsibilities at home. Entrenched attitudes that see women's primary role as that of wife and mother who remain largely responsible for unpaid, time-consuming and undervalued household and care responsibilities have come to the fore. **Male breadwinner bias has also influenced retrenchment decisions and thus**

**shaped the persistent imbalance in the division of paid employment and unpaid work between husbands and wives.** Women often take limited work or withdraw from their jobs to reconcile with family and domestic commitments, leaving them with little to no control over income-earning activity and household and non-household saving capacity. This decision is normally presumed as voluntary rather than understanding it as being deeply ingrained in patriarchal values. Unpaid household work has been identified as a major contributor to the persistent gender differences in formal labour market outcomes in which women in the Asia-Pacific region spend three hours more per day on average than men. It can be up to five hours in some countries in South Asia (OECD, 2014).

### Country findings

The impact of COVID-19 work, along with social distancing measures, increased the domestic and care workload of many workers. Despite some countries having an early response to COVID-19, like **Vietnam** (Hill, Baird and Seetahul, 2020c), **Mongolia** (World Bank, 2020a), **South Korea** (Kim and others, 2020), household labour is heavily skewed towards women who spend the most time on household and care work while trying to keep their job or business operation. So an increase in men's time on household activities is off a low base.

Women in China reportedly spend 2.5 times more hours on unpaid care work than men do, with an additional four hours per day on average (Trankman, 2020). In Bangladesh, women have done on average 3.43 times as much unpaid care work as men, or 6.2 hours a day during the lockdown. A rapid assessment study by the **Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee's (BRAC) Gender, Diversity and Justice programme** found that 91 per cent of women interviewed reported having to do greater amounts of unpaid care work during the COVID-19 period, and 89 per cent reported having no leisure time at all (UNDP, 2020). In **Thailand**, 26 per cent of young women reported an increase in unpaid adult care (compared with 16 per cent of young men), and 41 per cent of young women reported increases in unpaid childcare (compared with 28 per cent of young men) (UN Thailand, 2020).

In **Myanmar**, more female small and medium-sized entrepreneurs chose to quit their business in exchange for caring for children at home during the crisis (UN Myanmar, 2020). In **Nepal**, women and girls carry bigger responsibilities due to millions of children staying at home because of school closure (K.C., 2020).

The domestic burden exacerbates the situation of a country with a large number of widows, such as in **Afghanistan**. Forthcoming research by UN Women (2020) found that 83 per cent of women saw an increase in unpaid care work and 80 per cent in unpaid domestic work, compared with 75 per cent and 62 per cent for men, respectively. The situation has pushed female single parents to work fewer hours. The same challenges are faced by female-led households in other countries, like **Indonesia**. Nearly 2.5 million female-headed households juggle between earning money and teaching their children of primary school age, and more than 5 million have older people to support, of which 16.5 per cent are in the "sandwich generation". These combined burdens are likely to affect Indonesian women's economic participation, which is already low, at 53 per cent in 2019 (The Conversation, 2020).

The gendered nature of the COVID-19 impacts affect the well-being of men and women working in the private sector in different ways. In **Myanmar** (Hill, Baird and Seetahul, 2020a) and the **Philippines** (Hill, Baird and Seetahul, 2020b), for example, men are reported to have experienced income pressure whereas women have had greater intensification of domestic pressure that has affected their productivity at work. Men have experienced more stress because they are unable to exercise, while exhaustion due to increased domestic burdens underlie women's physical and mental health. In **Vietnam**, men are more likely to have experienced both increases and decreases in domestic pressure while women reported no change, suggesting more stability in women's levels of pressure. However, women may also be underreporting because of gender norms surrounding the role of women as steady emotional supporters in the household (Hill, Baird and Seetahul, 2020c).

## Vulnerable groups

In vulnerable groups of women, we include migrant workers and refugees who make up a significant share of the population in Asia. They may find themselves in vulnerable situations arising from the conditions in which movement takes place or the condition of living in a country they have migrated to (UNHCR, 2017). **With border closures, travel restrictions and lockdown measures put in place in many countries in Asia, the COVID-19 crisis has caused major job losses and restricted migrant workers' mobilization, which has led to exploitation of labour rights and lack of social and health protection.** Women and undocumented migrant workers are the most vulnerable due to restrictive policies, weak contracts and undervaluation of domestic work (UN Women, 2020a).

Female refugees generally experience disproportionate levels of vulnerability in terms of their living conditions in camps, such as limited access to basic needs, hygiene and health care, which, in this pandemic time, can increase virus transmission. **The high risk is due to women staying back in the camps longer to care for their children while men generally have more mobility for activities outside the home, whether or not it is work related.** The direct impact of the health crisis intersects with economic and food insecurity due to the delayed distribution of humanitarian aid reducing migrants' resilience and capacity to deal with the crisis in the long run. This is particularly evident in countries with a history of conflict or that have become the destination for refugees, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Myanmar and Thailand.

### Country findings

The World Bank estimated that approximately 2.96 million to 3.26 million documented and undocumented migrant workers live in **Malaysia**. Many of them are working informally as daily wage earners, and hence, the temporarily ceased operations have caused sudden income loss while those who can still work are vulnerable to labour rights violations, such as excessive working hours and inadequate COVID-19 protective measures. Their access to health service is constrained by the fear of detention due to their documentation status, in addition to language barriers and inadequate information and support services (ILO, 2020a).

In high-remittance-dependent countries, such as **Myanmar** and **Nepal**, the return of migrant workers presents challenges for households and puts them at higher risk of sudden poverty. An estimated 10 per cent of Myanmar's population resided abroad prior to the COVID-19 crisis, of which women comprised one third of the international migrants (Lambrecht and others, 2020). Remittances range up to 25 per cent of the gross domestic product in Nepal, and the decline in remittances can limit families from getting out of poverty, paying off unscrupulous loans and investing in education, health and land (Poudel and Subedi, 2020).

A rapid assessment with migrant workers in several countries, including **Thailand**, during April and May 2020 found that 32 per cent of them reported work-related problems or abuses, such as inability to refuse work during the lockdown, being pushed to take unpaid leave, having their personal documents kept by employer, threatened to have their contract terminated or other forms of harassment and violence. The majority of the respondents in this assessment were women (ILO, 2020b). As widely reported by the media, migrants in **India** who returned to their village faced the difficulty of not having any means of transport. Most migrant labourers were inhumanely treated on returning to their village (Azeez and others, 2020).

If left unaddressed, it will be less likely for women to regain their job or income security once normality returns. Thus, those who had entered non-traditional roles prior to the pandemic may revert to traditional roles in the aftermath of the crisis, such as taking care of a family business, setting up their own small enterprise or quitting work. In other words,

the challenges of COVID-19 to women's economic empowerment can create long-term barriers for more sustainable and inclusive economies and societies, thus undoing the gains of decades of feminist struggles for equality. Policies that can alleviate these ill-effects are crucial, and we next look at some of the current policy responses.



## Policy responses

The economic hardships on account of the pandemic have prompted several policy responses. In this section, we examine how—or whether—these policies are gender responsive and have benefited women. We consider the gender norms that have influenced the planning and implementation of these policies, making them effective or limiting their use.

Our findings on gender-sensitive measures across the 14 countries are based on the United Nations Development Programme's COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker. The database combines two approaches in determining what constitutes a gender-sensitive measure in response to COVID-19. These are (i) measures taken to tackle violence against women and girls and (ii) a broad range of social protection and labour market measures that target women's economic security as well as economic and fiscal

measures that provide support to female-dominated sectors (UNDP, 2020).

The analysis focuses on the aspects of women's economic security. Gender-sensitive responses through fiscal and economic measures, immediate support and unpaid care work are explored in relation with the challenges that have risen precisely because of high labour force participation of women in some sectors. The research also looked into the measures that have responded to target areas in which women are most at risk, such as migrant workers and refugees. Although there is evidence of exploitive working conditions of migrant workers and precarious living conditions of refugees, the study provides brief findings in this area due to the limited data on labour policies, worker protection and social protection for this group.

**Table 1 Labour force participation of women in some sectors and gender-responsive policies during COVID-19 pandemic**

Country	Women employment in industry***	Women employment in agriculture***	Women employment in service***	Estimated women workers among all workers in health and social work in 2020**	Policy measures on women's economic security*	Policy measures on unpaid care*
Afghanistan	24.85%	64.83%	10.32%	10–40%	1	0
Bangladesh	18.29%	56.50%	25.22%	41–50%	1	0
China	25.14%	22.09%	52.77%	61–70%	2	1
India	17.92%	53.61%	28.48%	41–50%	6	1
Indonesia	17.08%	25.53%	57.39%	61–70%	1	1
Malaysia	18.99%	6.13%	74.87%	71–80%	0	0
Mongolia	11.95%	24.09%	63.96%	81–90%	0	0
Myanmar	15.22%	42.87%	41.92%	61–70%	2	0
Nepal	8.23%	74.37%	17.34%	41–50%	0	0
Pakistan	17.31%	64.05%	18.65%	10–40%	1	0
Philippines	9.84%	13.17%	76.99%	61–70%	0	0
South Korea	13.20%	4.48%	82.33%	81–90%	0	4
Thailand	19.61%	28.20%	52.19%	71–80%	0	0
Vietnam	23.65%	37.54%	38.81%	61–70%	0	0

Source: \* = UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker. \*\* = ILO, 2020c. \*\*\* = World Bank, 2020b. The industry sector consists of mining and quarrying, manufacturing, construction and public utilities (electricity, gas and water). The services sector consists of wholesale and retail trade and restaurants and hotels; transport, storage and communications; financing, insurance, real estate and business services; and community, social and personal services. The agriculture sector consists of activities in agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing.

## Unpaid care work

As reflected in table 1, women in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan dominate employment in the agricultural sector. According to the International Labour Organization (2020c), the bigger proportion of women employed in agriculture is a reflection of poverty because it indicates the greater gender gap in employment, higher working poverty and lower productivity, with most women carrying out unpaid work. However, **only a few countries have introduced pandemic-related policy measures that specifically address unpaid care work** (China, India, Indonesia and South Korea). In fact, South Korea is the only country reported in Asia that devised specific measures for child care. The Korean government has provided a range of cash-based programmes to compensate the shift from child day care to home care as well as to care for disabled family members due to the lack of temporary care workers. The governments of China, India and Indonesia have provided various forms of care services for older persons and persons with disabilities, ranging from home-based service to medical support and food grains, etc. **Although the household subsidies provided relief to families' expenses, a direct support or mechanism in terms of time and energy spent for men and women in sharing their parental roles seems to be missing.**

## Women's economic security

For the 14 Asian countries studied, **there are few pandemic-related policy responses that target women's economic security.** This is particularly relevant for female-dominated sectors that are informal in nature, meaning that workers are not covered by labour laws or social protection and have low wages, such as in manufacturing, garments (industry sector), tourism and hospitality (services sector). India has the largest number of measures to address this area, while it has been overlooked by China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, the Philippines and Thailand, despite the large population of female workers in the services sector. The female workforce in these sectors have been affected by mass layoffs and furloughs.

Women's economic security is addressed through fiscal and economic plans that target support to business operations in the sectors in which women workers are overrepresented. However, many of them do not provide adequate mechanisms that ensure decent protection and security, such as equal potential employment and pay. **Pandemic-related policy measures that directly target women have supported immediate needs,** such as cash transfers, staple food supply, health insurance, including specific social assistance for women, such as maternal and child cash transfer in Myanmar and *Program Keluarga Harapan* targeting pregnant and lactating women in Indonesia. **Most of the policies did not devise strategic plans on how to improve women's economic resilience in the long run, particularly in the post-pandemic era.**

Of the measures that have been enacted to alleviate women's immediate economic hardships, some are not inclusive because they do not include lower-income groups. The evidence shows that women in some countries had difficulty to access information or were unsuccessful to apply for the government's aid due to lack of understanding of the process or documentation needed (Srivastav, Priya and Hathi, 2020). Even more, **the prevalence of gendered patriarchal norms in society have contributed in shaping discriminatory practices in state institutions.** Female household heads in certain countries reportedly were challenged when applying for government support because of the unclear eligibility requirements, which often define men as the head of the family. There is also the possibility for gender non-binary and other gender-diverse people to experience added burdens because of not fitting in either of the two categories.

### Country findings

In **China**, home-based services or temporary residential care are provided for older adults living alone with care needs or whose family caregiver is in quarantine or are health workers. In **South Korea**, where the schools and day care centres remain closed, parents with childcare responsibility are provided with a cash benefit of \$43 (50,000 Korean won) per day from the government. Working parents are entitled to additional five days of leave for family care, and employees with children can reduce their working hours for child care (UNDP, 2020).

Under the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, 500 Indian rupees (\$6.50) was transferred to 200 million women in India from April to June 2020. The Small Industries Development Bank of **India** initiated loans to medical facilities to upgrade themselves to provide better care during the pandemic. Most medical centres employ women in large numbers, and this scheme is bound to aid women's employment and well-being. The universal employment scheme Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which offers special quotas for women, raised the daily wage rate from 180 rupees to 202 rupees (UNDP, 2020). All women who receive benefits for LPG cylinders also received additional support during the pandemic.

The Government of **Afghanistan** has provided equity injections in terms of public sector subsidies to businesses, mainly in the health and agriculture sectors, where women account for the majority of workers (UNDP, 2020). The Overseas Workers Welfare Administration in **the Philippines** has provided cash aid to support stranded overseas workers (UNDP, 2020). However, government assistance and law enforcement have created conflicting implementation. Quarantine passes given to a household to buy goods and supplies and pay utilities are extended to heads of households, who are considered to be only the men, or to a family member not considered vulnerable under the health protocols set by the Health Department (UN Women, 2020b).

Through the Vulnerable Group Development programme, the government in **Bangladesh** is committed to distributing benefits targeting women in poor households (UNDP, 2020). There are challenges for women to access this payment, however, because the fund transfers are made through mobile financial services. Many women entrepreneurs with small or medium-sized enterprises are also not aware of the government assistance to micro businesses, amounting to 20 trillion Bangladeshi taka (UN Women, 2020c). Women face the same problem in **Pakistan** because they cannot access Ehsaas Emergency Cash, a financial service to help the vulnerable households buy rations. There was no outreach to share relevant information (Bari, 2020).

## Women's leadership in pandemic mitigation and recovery

One of the early recommendations made by feminist thinkers and development sector practitioners when the deleterious effects of the pandemic on women and girls was becoming apparent was that women should be included in the post-pandemic rebuilding (Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, 2020; UN Women, 2020). At the same time, gender-focused organizations began mobilizing and providing help to politically marginalized groups who immediately began to feel the effects of the pandemic, especially women, girls, gender-non-conforming people, religious and ethnic minorities and those who have been historically excluded. In line with the recommendations that women must be involved as architects of the post-pandemic world, this section provides a quick look at the relationship between women's formal leadership and gender-sensitive policy planning and implementation.

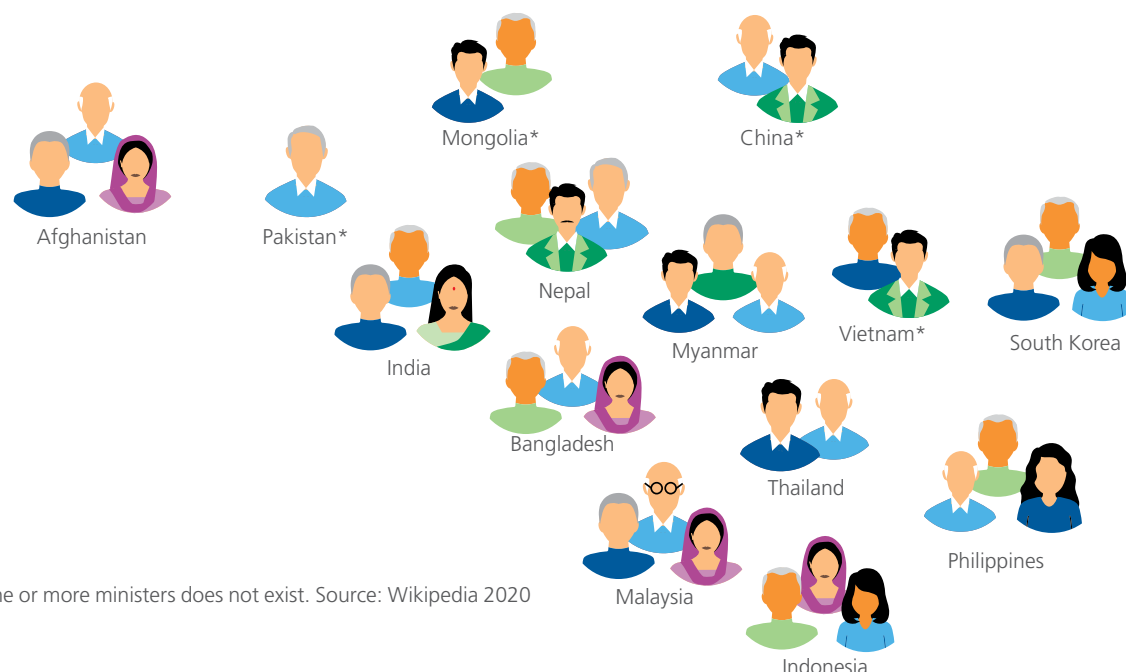
To assess the involvement of women, we take a closer look at three dimensions:

1. How many **women hold formal positions within the government as ministers?** As ministers are the first people who were called on to make urgent responses to contain the pandemic and its effects.
2. As the pandemic escalated, several countries set up **task forces** to respond adequately to the resulting multifaceted challenges. How many **members of these task forces are women?**
3. What examples of **women's leadership are evident at the grass-roots level?**

### Government

First, we looked at how many women hold minister positions in each country. We looked specifically at the health, finance and social welfare ministries because they have been instrumental in designing and implementing policies that aid the recovery and rebuilding processes (figure 3). A simple look at the cabinet ministers and whether they are male or female was undertaken, after which the policies of these governments were analysed if they were gender sensitive. Although health and finance ministries exist in most countries, the social welfare ministries take varied forms, like the Women and Gender Equality Ministry in South Korea, the Women and Child Welfare Ministry in India or the Women's Empowerment and Child Protection Ministry in Indonesia (which has a focus on social welfare).

Figure 3 Gender composition of ministers of health, finance and social welfare, 14 countries, 2020



\*One or more ministers does not exist. Source: Wikipedia 2020

The small number of women holding office as ministers in the relevant ministries reflects the traditional and historical biases against women in political leadership. Half the countries under study did not have ministers who identified as women holding these crucial portfolios. Through our research on feminist policy responses to alleviate the negative effects of the pandemic, we found that **there was no correlation between the presence of women holding the portfolios of health, finance and social welfare and feminist economic policies.** One reason for this could be because identifying as women does not mean identifying as a feminist or being male does not mean an opposition to feminism (van Daalen and others, 2020).

### COVID-19 task forces

Even prior to the pandemic, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus called for gender balance in senior management roles within the World Health Organization (Davies and others, 2019). And yet, only 23.8 per cent, 23.8 per cent and 37.5 per cent of the WHO's first, second and third International Health Regulations Emergency Committees for response to the COVID-19 pandemic, respectively, were women (van Daalen and others, 2020, p. 1).

Women dominate most expert committees on Covid-19, while decision-making groups consist of men, reflecting gender stereotypes about decision-making abilities. Despite the health care profession being largely feminized at the lowest levels, a disproportionately large number of decision-makers tend to be male (van Daalen and others, 2020). As the pandemic raged on, country leadership reached out to health specialists and experts who tended to be male, leaving out gender-diverse people and women (Bali and others, 2020; Rajan and others, 2020; van Daalen and others, 2020). This homogeneity of decision-making groups can lead to overseeing or underprioritizing problems faced by diverse groups of people. Apart from the solutions being inadequate, this could also result in a waste of resources, which is especially problematic in severely resource-constrained environments. For example, grains that could not have been distributed properly could rot, leading to added challenges of feeding disenfranchised households. Inadequate representation in decision-making groups can obscure challenges faced uniquely by women and impede the recovery process. Table 2 provides information regarding the gender composition of the COVID-19 task groups that were set up by various governments.

In most of the countries with missing data, task forces existed although it was difficult to determine the

**Table 2 Gender composition of COVID-19 task forces in 14 countries**

Country	Total number of members in task force	Male	Female	Others (non-binary, non-conforming)
1. Afghanistan	–	–	–	–
2. Bangladesh	32	28	4	–
3. China*	9	8	1	–
4. India	16	14	2	–
5. Indonesia	–	–	–	–
6. Malaysia	–	–	–	–
7. Mongolia	–	–	–	–
8. Myanmar	10	10	0	–
9. Nepal	11	11	0	–
10. Pakistan	–	–	–	–
11. Philippines*	8	8	0	–
12. South Korea**	7	4	1	–
13. Thailand	28	28	0	–
14. Vietnam	14	13	1	–

Note: \* = These countries have multiple teams to address the challenges of the pandemic; numbers indicate totals. \*\* = South Korea has a total of seven committees, of which the total numbers of members and the gender composition are unknown.

Source: Kathmandu Post, 2021; Rajan and others, 2020; van Daalen and others, 2020.

members or their gender composition. **Given that the numbers of women in these task forces is small, it is of little surprise that no gender diversity is present.** An in-depth analysis of the socioeconomic backgrounds, such as religion, ethnicity, age and so forth, was not possible for this study; it would be worthwhile to determine if members of these task forces would be representative of their populations.

Of course, no direct connection between the presence of women and feminist policies can be assumed or that the domination of men means policies are not inclusive. However, one cannot deny that the presence of women in decision-making committees would result in having a different, possibly, more inclusive perspective at the table.

### At the grass-roots level

Apart from the formal leadership shown by the State in mitigating the harms produced by the pandemic and other related measures, non-state actors, such as women's groups, individuals, multilateral organizations, local and international NGOs and others have collaborated in various ways to provide essential goods,

information and other kinds of support to women. A full description of the kinds of mobilization undertaken by these groups is beyond the scope of this paper; an in-depth study of informal and non-state actors' roles in helping improve the situation in various countries and contexts would be advantageous. Excluding women in task forces or ministerial positions and not including them in decision-making are all related to gender norms of who gets to be in the leadership positions in the first place (van Daalen, 2020). The kind of education and network that one might need to occupy these roles are comparatively less available to women, and not having them in these positions is a reminder of what was missing in previous decades. This lack of female leadership is reinforced when those in leadership positions are leaned on at such times, thus creating a vicious cycle of keeping women out. Keeping women from the grass-roots level out similarly enforces norms of women doing care work and being kept out of decision-making. At a time when the effects of the crisis have been expansive and simultaneously localized, it is beneficial to rely on grass-roots leadership and networks that have the insights and the relationships that can aid relief work and make it effective.

## Conclusions and policy recommendations

---

Many women have been affected by the lockdowns and the halting of work and businesses. These effects have been in the form of job and income losses, reduction in workloads, furloughs and business closures. Although all women felt the increasing burdens of childcare and household chores along with managing their work, it is the women from the lowest strata of society who have experienced additional burdens on account of being migrant labourers, refugees or being employed in precarious jobs that heightened the risk of their contracting the virus. Most governments have responded to the challenges posed by the crisis through policies, but these, too, reflect the gendered beliefs that are prevalent in society. Scores of women were unable to avail the entitlements and services meant for them because they did not have the required documentation or were not recognized as beneficiaries based on the patriarchal norms of familial headship. Similarly, women who are front-line workers felt the double burden of performing a gender-stereotyped role of providing care and yet being on the receiving end of government callousness. Women leadership is required in committees that decide the course of relief. But this study found that an abysmal number of women occupy leadership positions in formal task forces and ministries, even though it is women at the grass-roots level who have contributed heavily to assuaging the problems faced by local communities. These findings fall completely in line with reproductive, productive and community labour of women along with their interrelated effects.

Through this study, we identified two areas that could be further researched. As mentioned, the role of women's grass-roots networks has been effective and crucial, and these need to be explored to assess how their knowledge can be included in future decision-making. A second area of research is women-led business responses to the pandemic and their potential role in reviving the post-pandemic economy. As mentioned by Bradshaw and Fordham (2015), women are the best positioned to suggest effective measures during crises because of their life conditions. We must listen to them before we plan for them.

Based on the analysis, we highlight some takeaways and recommend an integrated set of policies for a sustainable impact towards women's socioeconomic security.

### Short-term improvements

- Increase efforts to assess the gendered impact of the crisis that include collecting and analysing existing and real-time sex-disaggregated data and statistics, rigorous research, understanding power dynamics at play, lived experience of diverse groups and intersectional aspects of race, class, caste, religion, etc. Ensure that the dissemination of data and findings are widespread and subsequently benefit policymakers, experts and non-state leaders to create accurate, relevant and timely responsive measures and actions.
- Create an equitable involvement of all genders in the decision-making arena and law enforcement as well as women and other gender minorities as the designated recipient for immediate relief measures. This means including female farmers, entrepreneurs in small and medium-sized enterprises and single mothers explicitly as targets for any cash transfer, loan programmes and technical assistance.
- Ensure that information and resources to the measures are accessible to rural women and women in lower-income groups.
- Develop public awareness and communication campaigns on the importance of men sharing the reproductive burden.
- Ensure that returning migrant workers are registered in the local authorities to facilitate extending social assistance and access to other support services to them. This includes a supportive mechanism to their reintegration into family and society in the situations in which migrant workers experience mistreatment and negative stereotypes.
- Establish community projects that engage and financially benefit workers who are laid off, including returning migrant workers and other vulnerable groups. Projects should provide potential employment and equal pay for all genders.
- Create a national and regional network or a caucus of women policymakers and formal leaders with female community and grass-root leaders to study, collect



and document existing measures and initiatives that have been implemented in response to the COVID-19 crisis. This systematization of women-generated knowledge can be used as a reference and constitute a comprehensive database for lessons learned and policymaking in the future.

### Long-term mitigation

- Improve labour protection measures as well as legal and social reforms to support women workers, entrepreneurs, consumers and traders during the recovery period. For example, follow up the ASEAN Labour Ministers on Response to the Impact of Coronavirus Diseases 2019 on Labour and Employment with a national action plan and then integrate it into domestic laws.
- Create specific laws and regulations that protect the productive lands in the agriculture sector and the rights of farmers to have a fair commodity price and protection from market dependence.
- Create incentives that promote the equal share of traditional unpaid domestic work, including child care, between men and women, and promote paid parental leave for both men and women.
- Increase public investment in the high-impact sector for gender equality, such as health care, reproductive health, community learning centres and affordable and subsidized public day cares.
- Include women leaders in state institutions and civil society groups that will decide, in the design of pandemic mitigation, where and which infrastructure projects will take place and thus that will benefit women and girls in the long run.
- Create an enabling environment for transforming gender norms related to unpaid work, the fair redistribution of economic sources and political representation through increasing gender-egalitarian education, skills training, laws and policies as well as decision-making positions at the community level, which should include institutional and state support for families towards the division of work in the productive and reproductive realms.
- Conduct research involving observation and measurement to understand the full impact of the pandemic on women's productive, reproductive and community spheres.



## References

---

- Abdul Azeez, E.P. and others (2020). *The Impact of COVID-19 on Migrant Women Workers in India*, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*.
- Bahn, K., J. Cohen, and Y. Meulen Rodgers (2020). A feminist perspective on COVID-19 and the value of care work globally. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 27(5), 695-699.
- Balgah, R. A., F.A. Amungwa, and B.M.J. Egwu (2019). A gender analysis of intra-household division of labor in Cameroon using Moser's triple roles framework. *Asian Journal of Agricultural Extension, Economics and Sociology*, vol. 29, no. 4, pp. 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.9734/ajaees/2019/v29i430095>.
- Bali, S., and others (2020). Off the back burner: diverse and gender-inclusive decision-making for COVID-19 response and recovery. *BMJ Global Health*, vol 5, no. 5.
- Bari, F. (2020). Women in the informal sector. *Dawn*, 18 Sep. Available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1580309>.
- Bhattacharya, T. (2017). *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*. London: Pluto Press.
- Bradshaw, S., and M. Fordham (2015). Double disaster: disaster through a gender lens. In: *Hazards, Risks and Disasters in Society*, A.E. Collins, and others, eds. Elsevier.
- CARE and Nepal Research Institute (2020). *Rapid Gender Analysis Report on COVID 19 Nepal, 2020*. Available at [http://www.careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/Nepal-Final-Report\\_RGA.pdf](http://www.careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/Nepal-Final-Report_RGA.pdf).
- Center for Feminist Foreign Policy (2020). *Policy Brief: A Feminist Foreign Policy Response to COVID 19*. Available at [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57cd7cd9d482e9784e4ccc34/t/5f034a694227530712b1b4f6/1594051182529/Policy+Brief\\_+A+Feminist+Foreign+Policy+Response+to+COVID-19.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57cd7cd9d482e9784e4ccc34/t/5f034a694227530712b1b4f6/1594051182529/Policy+Brief_+A+Feminist+Foreign+Policy+Response+to+COVID-19.pdf).
- Che, L., H. Du, and K.W. Chan (2020). *Unequal Pain: A Sketch of the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Migrants' Employment in China*, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, pp. 1241–1299.
- Davies, S. E., S. Harman, and R. Manjoo (2019). Why it must be a feminist global health agenda. *The Lancet*, vol. 393, pp. 601–603.
- Kathmandu Post* (2021) COVID Crisis Management Centre to take over high-level coordination committee. 13 June. Available at <https://kathmandupost.com/health/2020/06/13/covid-crisis-management-centre-to-take-over-high-level-coordination-committee>.
- Economic and Political Weekly* (2020). Reverse migration of labourers amidst COVID-19. Available at <https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/32-33/commentary/reverse-migration-labourers-amidst-covid-19.html>.
- Engblom, A., N. Lephilbert, and N. Baruah (2020). *COVID 19: Impact on Migrant Workers and Country Response in Thailand*. Bangkok: ILO. Available at [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_741920.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms_741920.pdf).
- Fajarwati, A., and others (2016). The productive and reproductive activities of women as form of adaptation and post-disaster livelihood strategies in Huntap Kuwang and Huntap Plosokerep. *Procedia – Social and Behavioural*

*Science*, vol 227, pp. 370–377.

Feminist COVID Response (2020). Feminist response to COVID-19. Available at <https://www.feministcovidresponse.com/principles>.

Guha, R. (2020). Migrant woes 'greatest manmade tragedy' in India since partition. *The Hindu*, 24 May. Available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/migrant-woes-greatest-manmade-tragedy-in-india-since-partition-ramchandra-guha/article31663219.ece>.

Hill, E., M. Baird, and S. Seetahul (2020a). Myanmar and COVID 19: impact on the private sector. Available at <https://investinginwomen.asia/knowledge/myanmar-covid-19-impact-private-sector/>.

\_\_\_\_\_ (2020b). The Philippine and COVID 19: impact on the private sector. Available at <https://investinginwomen.asia/knowledge/philippines-covid-19-impact-private-sector/>.

\_\_\_\_\_ (2020c). Vietnam and COVID 19: impact on the private sector. Available at <https://investinginwomen.asia/knowledge/vietnam-covid-19-impact-on-private-sector/>.

International Development Research Centre (IDRC) (2020). Meeting the challenges of the COVID 19 pandemic in Myanmar. Available at <https://www.idrc.ca/en/research-in-action/meeting-challenges-covid-19-pandemic-myanmar>.

International Labour Organization (ILO) (2020a). Reaching women migrant workers in Malaysia amid the COVID 19 health crisis, 19 June. Available at [https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/articles/WCMS\\_751495/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/articles/WCMS_751495/lang--en/index.htm).

\_\_\_\_\_ (2020b). *COVID-19: Impact on Migrant Workers and Country Response in Thailand*. Bangkok. Available at [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_741920.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms_741920.pdf).

\_\_\_\_\_ (2020c). *The COVID 19 Response: Getting Gender Equality Right for a Better Future for Women at Work*. Bangkok. Available at [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms\\_744685.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms_744685.pdf).

Jun, S., and S. Gerelt-Od (2020). Funding women entrepreneurs on Mongolia's COVID frontline. The Asia Foundation, 8 July. Available at <https://asiafoundation.org/2020/07/08/funding-women-entrepreneurs-on-mongolias-covid-front-line/>.

Liao, K.A.S. (2020). Operation 'bring them home': learning from the large-scale repatriation of overseas Filipino workers in times of crisis. *Asian Population Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 310–330.

Lutz, H. (2015). Intersectionality as method. *Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1-2, pp. 39–44.

K.C, L. (2020). How COVID-19 worsens gender inequality in Nepal: the pandemic will worsen existing gaps in women's education, income, and employment prospects. *The Diplomat*, 23 June. Available at <https://thedi diplomat.com/2020/06/how-covid-19-worsens-gender-inequality-in-nepal/>.

Khanapurkar, R., and others (2020) Strengthening the online education ecosystem in India. *ORF Occasional Paper no. 282*. Delhi. Observer Research Foundation. Available at <https://www.orfonline.org/research/strengthening-the-online-education-ecosystem-in-india/>.

Kim, S., and others (2020). Gender analysis of COVID-19 outbreak in South Korea: a common challenger and call for action. *Health Education and Behavior*, vol. 1, no. 6.

Lambrech, I., and others (2020). *A Gender Transformative Response to COVID 19 in Myanmar*. Washington, D.C.: International Food Policy Research Institute. Available at <https://www.ifpri.org/publication/gender-transformative-response-covid-19-myanmar>.

Lewis, H. (2020). The coronavirus is a disaster for feminism. *The Atlantic*, 19 March. Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/feminism-womens-rights-coronavirus-covid19/608302/>.

McLaren, H.J., and others (2020). COVID-19 and women's triple burden: vignettes from Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Vietnam and Australia. *Social Science*, vol. 9, no. 87.

Moser, C. (1993). *Gender Planning and Development: Theory Practice and Training*. London: Routledge.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2014). *Gender Equality in the "three Es" in the Asia/Pacific Region*. Paris. Available at [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/soc\\_aag-2014-5-en.pdf](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/soc_aag-2014-5-en.pdf)

Poudel, K., and P. Subedi (2020). Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on socioeconomic and mental health aspects in Nepal. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, vo. 66, no. 8, pp. 748–755.

Rajan, D., and others (2020). Governance of the Covid-19 response: a call for more inclusive and transparent decision-making. *BMJ Global Health*, vol. 5, no. e002655.

Ruwanapura, K.N., and A. Mezzadri (2020). How Asia's factories swapped high street fashion for PPE. Available at <https://ed.ac.uk/covid-19-response/expert-insights/how-asia-clothing-factories-switched-to-ppe>.

Setyonaluri, D., and R.R. Samudra (2020). In Indonesia, the COVID-19 pandemic hurts poor women the most. *The Conversation*, 22 Sep. Available at <https://theconversation.com/in-indonesia-the-covid-19-pandemic-hurts-poor-women-the-most-145694>.

Srivastav, N., A. Priya, and P. Hathi (2020). Our essential workers need essential care. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Available at <https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/31/commentary/our-essential-workers-need-essential-care.html>.

Teoh, M., and C. Chung (2020). COVID 19 impact: women and children most vulnerable. *The Star*, 25 Aug. Available at <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/08/25/women-and-children-most-vulnerable>.

Trankmann, B. (2020). How gender inequality harms our COVID 19 recovery – views from China. UNDP China. 10 Apr. Available at <https://www.cn.undp.org/content/china/en/home/ourperspective/ourperspectivearticles/2020/how-gender-inequality-harms-our-covid-19-recovery--views-from-ch.html>.

UN Myanmar (2020). Women can help Myanmar emerge stronger from COVID 19 if they are given a chance. 3 July. Available at <https://myanmar.un.org/en/51819-women-can-help-myanmar-emerge-stronger-covid-19-if-they-are-given-chance>.

UN Thailand (2020). Against the odds: stories from women in Thailand during COVID-19. 28 June. Available at <https://thailand.un.org/en/51835-against-odds-stories-women-thailand-during-covid-19>.

UN Women (2020a). Migrant workers in the Asia Pacific. Available at <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/focus-areas/women-poverty-economics/migrant-workers>.

\_\_\_\_\_ (2020b). *Gendered Dimensions of COVID 19 in the Philippines*. Bangkok. Available at <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2020/06/final-gender%20snapshot%202-phl.pdf?la=en&vs=1144>.

\_\_\_\_\_ (2020c). *Gendered Impacts of COVID 19*. Bangkok. Available at [https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2020/07/webinar%20report%2019%20may\\_gendered%20impacts%20of%20covid-19.pdf?la=en&vs=3837](https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2020/07/webinar%20report%2019%20may_gendered%20impacts%20of%20covid-19.pdf?la=en&vs=3837).

UNDP Bangladesh (2020). COVID-19: a step back for women's empowerment in Bangladesh? Available at <https://www.bd.undp.org/content/bangladesh/en/home/presscenter/articles/2020/08/31/covid-19--a-step-back-for-womens-empowerment-in-bangladesh--.html>.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2020). The COVID 19's gender tracker. Available at <https://data.undp.org/gendertacker/>.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2017). *Migrants in Vulnerable Situations UNHCR's Perspectives*. Geneva. Available at <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/596787174.pdf>.

van Daalen, K.R., C. Bajnoczki, and M. Chowdhury (2020). Symptoms of a broken system: the gender gaps in COVID-19 decision-making. *BMJ Global Health*, vol. 5, no. e003549.

World Bank (2020a). Monitoring COVID-19 impacts on households in Mongolia. Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/mongolia/brief/monitoring-covid-19-impacts-on-households-in-mongolia>.

\_\_\_\_\_ (2020b). Gender Statistics. Available at <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/gender-statistics>.

World Trade Organization (WTO) (2020). The economic impact of COVID-19 on women in vulnerable sectors and economies. *COVID-19 Reports*, no. 2020/10. Geneva.

## About the authors

**Rizki Amalia Affiat** has ten years of research and activism in the field of gender, post-conflict development and social justice. She continues working through various research projects and advocacies in transnational scope.

**Fiona Vaz** is a gender researcher with a focus on education, labour force participation, politics and leadership. Previously, Fiona worked for a decade as an educator in various capacities in the development sector.

**Peny Rahmadhani** has six years of combined experience in the fields of teaching, curriculum development and research. She has been exploring the relationship of education, gender and wider social contexts.

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

## Imprint

© 2021 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung  
Nepal Office | Gender Justice Hub Asia  
Sanepa, Ward No. 2, Lalitpur  
P. O. Box: 11840  
Kathmandu, Nepal

Responsible: **Jonathan Menge** | Project Director

 <https://asia.fes.de/>

 FESinAsia

 @FESinAsia

To order publication: [geha@fes.de](mailto:geha@fes.de)

Commercial use of all media published by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is the oldest political foundation in Germany. The foundation is named after Friedrich Ebert, the first democratically elected president of Germany.

The Gender Justice Hub Asia coordinates FES' work on gender justice in the Asia and Pacific region. Together with colleagues, feminists, and partners in the region we create spaces for exchange and mutual learning and develop transformative strategies for a more gender just future.

[asia.fes.de](https://asia.fes.de)

