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Bridging the Gender Gap: Socio-economic Pathways to Employment Equality in Asia

Cinsiyet Uçurumunun Azaltılması: Asya'da İstihdam Eşitliğine Giden Sosyoekonomik Yollar

Meltem İnce Yenilmez ^{a,*} & Burak Darıcı ^b

^a Prof. Dr., İzmir Demokrasi Üniversitesi, 35140, İzmir / Türkiye
ORCID: 0000-0002-4689-3196

^b Prof. Dr., Bandırma 17 Eylül Üniversitesi, 10250, Bandırma, Balıkesir / Türkiye
ORCID: 0000-0003-0765-7374

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ÖZ

Erkekler ve kadınlar arasındaki önemli eşitsizliklerle birlikte, iş yerindeki cinsiyet eşitsizliği Asya'da önemli bir sorun olmaya devam etmektedir. Kadınlar için istihdamın nüfusa oranı 2024 yılında sadece %44,7 iken, bu oran erkekler için ortalama %73,5'tir. Kadınların istihdama katılımının %24,5, erkeklerin katılımının ise %75,3 olduğu Güney Asya, en eşitsiz bölgedir. Doğu ve Güneydoğu Asya'da kadın istihdam oranları sırasıyla %61,2 ve %55,8 ile daha yüksektir, ancak yine de %77'yi aşan erkek katılım oranının altındadır. Başlıca engeller arasında kültürel gelenekler, yetersiz çocuk bakım sistemi ve örgün eğitim ve istihdama sınırlı erişim yer almaktadır. Güney Asya'da bu eşitsizlikler yoksulluk ve eşitsizliği sürdürürken, Doğu ve Güneydoğu Asya'da maaş farklılıkları ve liderlik pozisyonlarında yetersiz temsil kapsayıcı ilerlemeyi engellemektedir. 2014 ve 2024 yılları arasında, sabit etkiler panel veri regresyon yaklaşımı ile, kentleşme, eğitim, ekonomik genişleme ve doğrudan yabancı yatırım (DYY) toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliğinin ilerletilmesinde önemli bir rol oynamıştır. Örneğin, Doğu Asya kentleşme ve eğitimdeki iyileşmeden faydalanmış olsa da, Güney Asya büyük yapısal ve kültürel engellerle karşılaşmaya devam etmektedir. Küçük iyileşmelere rağmen, kadınlar kayıt dışı ve güvencesiz işlerde aşırı temsil edilmeye devam etmekte, bu da ekonomik eşitsizliği artırmaktadır. Bu sorunların ele alınması için eğitimin yaygınlaştırılması, çocuk bakım sistemlerinin güçlendirilmesi, kadın girişimcilerin finansmana erişiminin artırılması ve eşit ücret yasalarının uygulanması gerekmektedir. Toplumsal cinsiyet uçurumunun kapatılması sadece ahlaki açıdan doğru değil, aynı zamanda kapsayıcı büyümeyi ve uzun vadeli bölgesel refahı desteklemek için ekonomik açıdan da önemlidir.

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ABSTRACT

With significant inequalities between men and women, gender inequality in the workplace remains a significant issue in Asia. The employment-to-population ratio for women was only 44.7% in 2024, compared to an average of 73.5% for men. With women's participation at 24.5% and men's at 75.3%, South Asia is the most unequal area. In East and Southeast Asia, female employment rates are higher at 61.2% and 55.8%, respectively, but they are still below the male participation rate of more than 77%. Among the primary barriers are cultural customs, a subpar childcare system, and limited access to formal education and employment. In South Asia, these disparities perpetuate poverty and inequality, while in East and Southeast Asia, salary gaps and underrepresentation in leadership positions obstruct inclusive progress. Between 2014 and 2024, with fixed effects panel data regression approach, urbanization, education, economic expansion, and foreign direct investment (FDI) all had a significant role in advancing gender equality. For example, although East Asia has benefited from urbanization and improved education, South Asia continues to face major structural and cultural obstacles. Despite slight improvements, women continue to be overrepresented in informal and insecure jobs, which furthers economic inequality. Addressing these issues requires expanding education, strengthening childcare systems, enhancing access to financing for female entrepreneurs, and enforcing laws on equal pay. Closing the gender gap is not only morally right but also economically important to support inclusive growth and long-term regional prosperity.

* Sorumlu yazar/Corresponding author.
e-posta: melteminceyenilmez@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

Gender equality in employment remains one of the most critical development challenges facing nations worldwide, specifically in Asia. The estimated male employment-to-population ratio was about 70.8 percent in 2024, whereas the comparative female employment-to-population ratio was at a lowly 46.4 percent (ILO, 2024). In Asia, the disparity is enormous: on average, the male employment-to-population ratio reaches about 73.5 percent, while for women the ratio stands at only 44.7 percent. This means that South Asia still records the highest deviation, with the lowest rate for females at 24.5 percent as against 75.3 percent for men (World Bank, 2024). For East Asia and Southeast Asia, things are somewhat better: the female labour force participation rate is 61.2 percent and 55.8 percent, respectively. However, these figures also remain well below those in the same regions for men, with the latter exceeding 77 percent (ILO, 2023).

While many Asian countries have been registering high economic growth, social and cultural barriers, inadequate childcare infrastructure, and gender discrimination stand as stumbling blocks in women's path to seeking employment opportunities (OECD, 2024). Excluding women from the labour market not only has an adverse impact on the overall gender equality situation but also on general economic development. For example, in South Asia, the low labour force participation of women contributes to poverty and inequality, while in East and Southeast Asia, higher labour force participation is associated with continued gender gaps in leadership positions and wage disparities (ILO, 2023).

The implications of such exclusion are indeed profound. The resulting high employment dependency ratios from the low participation of females burden families and social systems across Asia. Excluding women also cuts the region's ability to tap into its demographic dividend for full economic potential. In fact, according to estimates, closing the gender gap in the workforce can grow the economies of Asia annually by a couple of trillion dollars (Gu et al., 2024). This paper investigates the main determinants of gender equality in employment in Asian countries using updated data from 2014 to 2024. In this paper, gender equality in employment is measured as the ratio of female to male employment rates for the 15–64 age group. The analysis implements the ordinary least squares method with country-fixed effects to identify determinants of gender equality across diverse Asian economies.

Gender inequality refers to the systematic and structural distinctions between individuals purely due to their sex, which lead to unequal access to resources, opportunities, or rights. Discrimination against women and gender minorities especially manifests in those sectors which are subject to such unequal treatment as education, health, labour force participation, political representation, and social recognition. Gender inequality is inherently associated with social justice and human rights; the advancement of society will prosper when everybody feels included and therefore,

every strategy to counteract gender inequality is important for social and economic development. There are practical measures in many nations to curb inequities between sexes, but in many others, especially underdeveloped ones, substantial differences persist.

Gender equality varies across regions, with Scandinavia being the hallmark of gender parity, while other regions - particularly those in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and certain parts of Asia - remain far behind. In line with this, Iceland, Norway, and Finland consistently rating themselves high for gender equality in the Global Gender Gap Reports, recognizing their strong policies on education, labour market participation, and political empowerment. Otherwise, within Asia, gender inequality remains a colossal challenge, with various countries like Japan, India, and South Korea still bearing the brunt of gender pay gaps, under-representation in leadership roles, and unequal participation in the labour market. Some positive changes have been observed in this region, but they are progressing at a snail's pace.

Gender inequality in Asia presents a unique environment for study owing to the cultural, economic, and political diversity of the continent. Some countries like the Philippines have achieved some measure of gender equality concerning education and labour force participation, while others remain entrenched in gender norms and practices. This situation highlights the propensity for traditional gender roles to constrain women's economic participation and personal freedom in many Asian societies, notwithstanding the existence of, and commitment to pursuing, more inclusive policies. Research in this area has demonstrated that gender-based barriers do still exist in labour markets, educational practices, and political representation in Asia, thereby revealing areas of success and continued challenges.

In the context of gender inequality research in Asia, the major gap is a little understanding of the intersectionalities concerning race, class, and location. Much of the literature tends to analyze gender as one independent variable and ignores how these other social variables actually interact with gender to compound these inequalities. The second gap is that not much work has been done regarding the impact of gender equality interventions on the long-term change of social norms. Closing this gap will also indicate how thereafter the own developed laid recommendations can be implemented. This study, therefore, intends to fill this gap by exploring the intersections between gender and the other variable, assessing the long-term impact of gender equality measures, and providing sound empirical evidence for policy directions in the future with fixed effects panel data regression approach. It attempts to observe cross-sectional and time-series variation of gender equality in 30 Asian economies between 2014 and 2024. The very formation of the model protects unobserved heterogeneity through fixed effects, hence making a considered estimation of the structural causes of gender disparities in employment by allowing the adjustment of extraneous economic, demographic, and institutional variables, which, in turn,

speaks towards developing actual policies and interventions for gender-inclusive labour markets.

The structure of the paper is as follows: the next section discusses the importance of gender equality in employment and presents updated evidence on the trends and characteristics of female, male, and total employment-to-population ratios. The third section will review the relevant empirical literature, focusing on recent findings and regional disparities. Section IV describes the data and methodology, and Section 5 presents the results of the cross-country regressions that identify the main determinants of gender equality in employment for South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia. The last section will provide policy implications, with concrete policy recommendations based on each subregion's unique situation.

From such understandings of the hindrances on the path of gender equality within employment, better policies implementing active labour markets have been suggested. Such suggestions include paving easier access to education and vocational training for females, issuing stricter anti-discrimination acts, building extended childcare structures, and ensuring greater engagement in decision-making bodies. Thus, addressing these issues can enable Asian countries to tap the full potential of their labour forces and move towards all-inclusive economic growth and progress toward achieving sustainable development goals.

2. Literature Review

Gender inequality in employment remains a pressing issue across many Asian countries, where women face significant barriers in accessing and maintaining stable employment. Babafemi (2023) highlights that societal discrimination, inadequate childcare facilities, and workplace gender bias persist as major obstacles to female labour force participation. Studies have consistently shown that these factors limit women's access to formal employment, restrict career advancement, and perpetuate occupational segregation (Khan et al., 2017; Abro, 2022; Agut et al., 2023). Kabeer (2015), Saluja (2023) and Adera & Abdisa (2023) argue that entrenched social norms and gender stereotypes further exacerbate these disparities, influencing wage gaps and limiting women's access to leadership roles.

The burden of unpaid domestic labour and caregiving responsibilities disproportionately falls on women, significantly impeding their participation in the labour market. Sinha et al. (2024) emphasize that women in Asia spend significantly more hours on unpaid domestic work compared to men, which restricts their ability to engage in paid employment. This dynamic has long-term implications, as it reinforces gendered labour divisions and limits economic opportunities for women. Such constraints also extend to part-time and informal work, where women are overrepresented, leading to lower wages, reduced job security, and limited access to social protections. The economic consequences of excluding women from the workforce are profound. Studies suggest that increasing

female labour force participation could significantly boost GDP growth across Asian economies. Elborgh-Woytek et al. (2013) and Gulvira et al. (2024) estimate that narrowing the gender gap in employment could add trillions of dollars annually to the region's economic output. South Asia, in particular, exhibits alarmingly low female labour force participation, contributing to persistent poverty and economic inequality (ILO, 2024). Meanwhile, East and Southeast Asia, despite higher female labour force participation rates, continue to experience gender disparities in wages and leadership representation.

The structural ramifications of gender exclusion also manifest in deepening employment dependency ratios, which place additional burdens on families and social systems across Asia. Gu et al. (2024) estimate that leveraging women's economic potential could maximize demographic dividends, particularly in countries with ageing populations. However, achieving this requires targeted policy interventions that address systemic barriers to employment. Without structural changes, gender disparities will continue to hinder the region's economic development and social equity goals.

Recent research has identified notable regional variations in gender equality across Asia. Borrowman and Klasen (2019) argue that economic growth in East and Southeast Asia has facilitated gender role transformations, driven by urbanization, improved education access, and investments in public infrastructure. In Vietnam and South Korea, for example, urbanization policies aimed at integrating women into managerial and labour-intensive roles have had positive effects. However, the effectiveness of these policies is contingent upon complementary measures, such as affordable childcare and gender-sensitive workplace reforms.

In contrast, South Asia continues to grapple with patriarchal traditions and limited female mobility, which significantly impede women's employment prospects. Azmat and Petrongolo (2014) and Petrongolo and Ronchi (2020) highlight that cultural and structural barriers necessitate more comprehensive interventions, including gender-sensitive employment laws and legal protections against workplace discrimination. Verick (2023) suggests that addressing hiring biases, wage disparities, and limited career progression opportunities is essential for improving female employment rates in the region.

The rise of the digital economy presents both opportunities and challenges for gender equality in employment. Ahmad et al. (2024) note that digital technology has expanded market access for women in urban centres, particularly in sectors such as e-commerce and IT-enabled services. Countries like Malaysia and Singapore have successfully integrated women into the digital workforce through targeted inclusion programs. However, automation has also displaced many women from low-skilled jobs, exacerbating employment inequalities. This digital divide is further intensified by unequal access to technology and digital

literacy gaps, particularly in South Asia (Dias, 2021).

To mitigate these disparities, policymakers must invest in digital literacy programs, vocational training, and technology accessibility. The Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2023) emphasizes that bridging the digital gender gap is crucial for preparing women for the evolving job market. Additionally, gender-sensitive policies that promote workplace flexibility, parental leave provisions, and fair compensation structures are necessary to support women's sustained participation in the labour force. Despite the existing body of research, a significant gap remains in understanding the intersectionality of gender inequality with other social dimensions, such as class, ethnicity, and geographic location. While many studies focus on labour market trends, fewer examine the long-term impacts of gender equality policies or their effectiveness across diverse social contexts. Addressing this research gap is critical for developing tailored policy recommendations that promote sustainable and inclusive economic growth. This study seeks to fill this void by evaluating recent labour market data from 2014 to 2024, applying OLS with country-fixed effects to discern determinants of gender equality in employment across Asian economies.

3. Importance of Gender (In)equality in Employment in Asian Countries

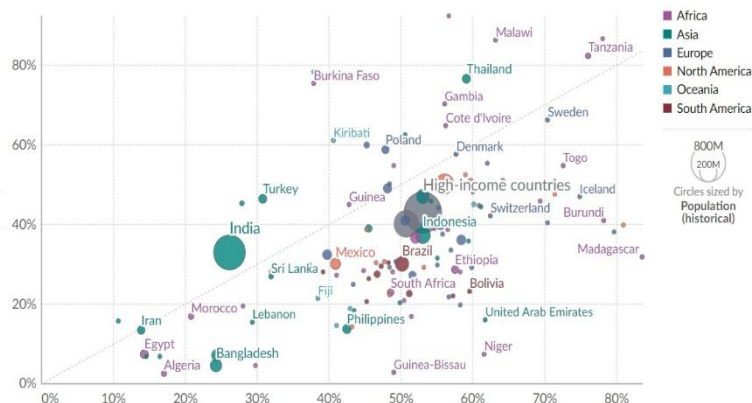
While Asian countries have made progress, gender disparities in opportunities and women's participation in economic activities remain critical challenges in the developing world. These two issues are very significant because of their adverse impact on sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction (Puh et al., 2022). Recognizing these challenges, the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment have been integrated into global initiatives such as the SDGs, building on the work from the United Nations MDGs. As a result, gender equality has emerged as an important concern in public policy in most Asian countries (Kazandjian et al., 2019).

First, women's participation in employment is considered one of the powerful instruments in combating poverty. It gives personal power to influence family decisions and to reorient household expenditure towards essential needs such as education and health care for children. From a rights perspective, gender equality in employment remains a core concern of fairness, equity, and human rights (Small and van der Meulen Rodgers, 2023). Beyond ethics, it has measurable economic benefits: productivity gains, a wider tax base, and stronger social protection systems. Equally important, gender equality can spark innovation, business growth, and sustainable development for the entire society (Malta and Newiak, 2019).

The figure above shows how female labour force participation (FLFP) varied by country between 2010 and 2023. While some Asian countries have made tremendous progress, others have not. For instance, Thailand and Indonesia have high rates of female labour market

involvement that have either stayed the same or grown over time. These nations have profited from both fundamental economic changes and woman-empowering policies, such as expanded educational chances, microfinance opportunities, and a slow social change that supports women's employment positions (De Henau and Perrons, 2016; Budina et al., 2023). Given its location close to the top of the graph, Thailand appears to have maintained high FLFP levels, most likely as a result of its diverse economy and strong social infrastructure. In contrast, Bangladesh and India are ranked far lower, suggesting consistently low FLFP rates. Even with a significantly rising economy, India still has long-standing obstacles like gender norms, inadequate childcare facilities, and sectoral employment concentrated in fields that are less accessible to women (Halim et al., 2023). Although Bangladesh has made significant strides in garment exports and women's employment in this sector, it still struggles to translate these gains into higher rates of labour force participation. These differences highlight the importance of enacting gender-sensitive legislation, improving working conditions, and challenging social conventions to maximize the potential of female labour force participation in developing countries (Klasen, 2019; Xu, 2023).

Figure 1: Female Labour Force Participation Rates

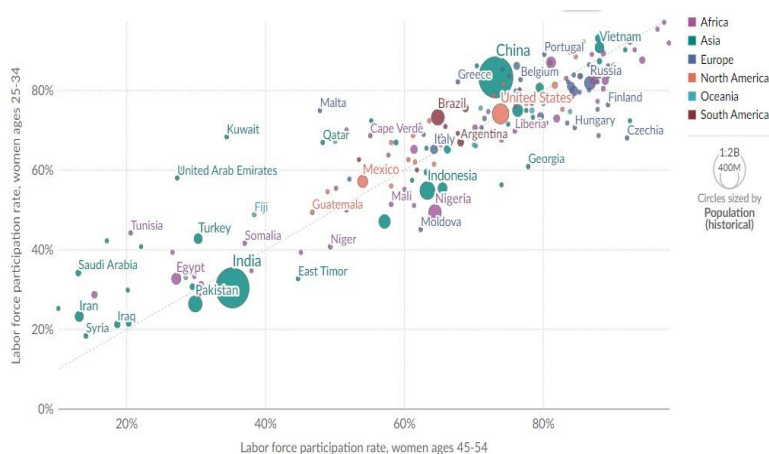


Source: World Bank (2024)

Comparing two different age groups—women aged 25–34 and those aged 45–54—the chart shows how the rates of female labour force participation vary significantly across Asian nations. The best in the region are China and Vietnam, which have the greatest rates of female involvement in both age categories. Vietnam's extensive labour laws and a culture that encourages women's economic participation are the reasons for its high participation rates. China benefits from regulations that encourage women to work in the industrial and service sectors in addition to infrastructure support such as childcare facilities. Due to socioeconomic concerns and generally equal gender duties, women have been highly incorporated into the workforce during their prime working years, as seen by these advancements. In comparison, the female labour market participation percentage is below 40% for both age groups in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, India, Pakistan, and many other Middle Eastern

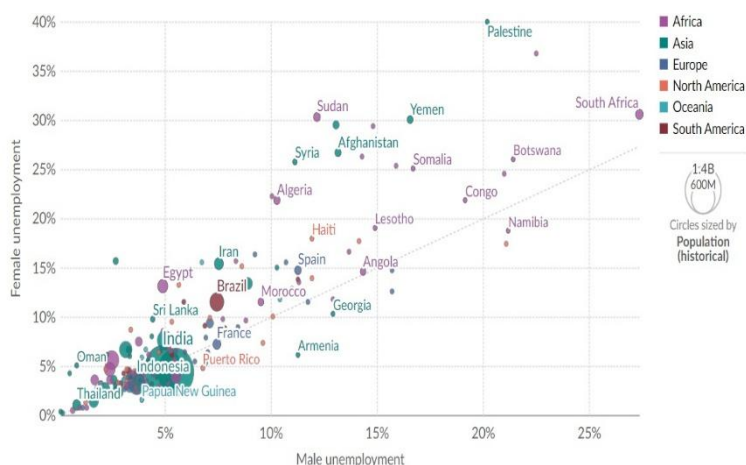
countries. These results are affected by cultural norms, women's lack of access to high-quality education and training, and insufficient legislative frameworks that prevent women from obtaining employment. The comparatively low rates of involvement among younger women (ages 25–34) in these nations can further emphasize issues surrounding marriage and child care, which frequently arise during this period of life. The difference between nations highlights how important institutional, cultural, and legal elements are in determining the economic activity levels of women throughout Asia.

Figure 2: Younger Versus Older Women's Labour Force Participation, 2023



Source: ILO, 2024.

Figure 3: Unemployment Rate by Gender, 2024

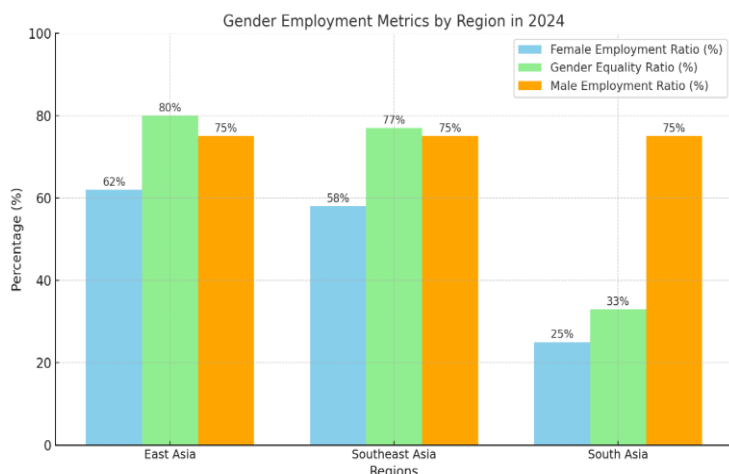


The figure depicts the gender gap in unemployment in different nations, with a particular emphasis on Asia, where there are significant variations. The low unemployment rates for both men and women, often around 5%, are a notable feature of some Asian countries, such as Thailand, Indonesia, and Oman. These low rates can be attributed to significant economic growth, a stable labour market, and structural factors that allow for both male and female employment. These countries seem to have a fairly balanced labour force integration rate for women, notwithstanding some distortions from sectoral gender norms, such as the

larger percentage of women working in lower-paying or informal jobs. However, the unemployment rate is much greater for both men and women in Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria, with women frequently facing a far higher incidence of unemployment than men. For instance, the jobless rate for women is above 30% in Yemen and Afghanistan, while the unemployment rate for men is significant yet relatively low. Deeper socioeconomic issues, such as political unpredictability, violence, and constrictive cultural norms that disproportionately prevent women from entering the profession, are indicated by this gap. Gender disparities in workforce participation remain because of structural hurdles that worsen these unemployment inequalities, such as women's reduced access to childcare, education, and job training. Furthermore, even if the unemployment rates in nations like Egypt and Iran are closer to the median, women's unemployment rates are greater than men's. This tendency is prevalent in developing Asian nations, where social norms and economic structures usually restrict women's work opportunities, especially in formal sectors. These trends suggest that tackling the gender gap in the workforce necessitates targeted initiatives to remove structural obstacles that women encounter in addition to macroeconomic remedies for unemployment. Examples include investing in gender-sensitive policies, expanding vocational training, and changing regulatory frameworks to promote equitable employment opportunities.

4. Equal Employment Opportunity Trends in Asia

Among developing regions, East Asia remains the top-ranked region in terms of gender equality of employment in 2024, with a female employment-to-population ratio of roughly 62% and a female-to-male employment ratio of 80%. Southeast Asia, with a female employment ratio of 58%, comes in second. South Asia, on the other hand, has the lowest female employment-to-population ratio, at just 25%, indicating that bridging gender inequalities is extremely difficult. Disparities are still present in some areas, where the male employment ratio is consistently above 75% (Perkins, 2024). While nations like China, South Korea, and Japan have reduced gender gaps in the workforce by implementing policies that encourage women to enter the workforce, other South Asian nations, such as India and Pakistan, still face deeply ingrained inequalities due to cultural norms, a lack of infrastructure, and women's limited access to education. There is still a lot of gender disparity in the workplace in South Asia (Dahal et al., 2024). For instance, women have historically had poor employment rates in this field. Women's engagement is limited by sociological and economic factors, as only a small portion of women hold official work. Nonetheless, women's labour force participation has somewhat improved throughout East and Southeast Asia as a result of economic diversification, urbanization, and educational achievements.

Figure 4: Gender Employment by Region, 2024

Source: World Bank (2024)

This graphic shows the employment rates for women in 2024 throughout the three main Asian regions. East Asia has made significant strides in integrating women into the workforce, as demonstrated by its high female employment-to-population ratio of 62% and gender equality ratio of 80%. With 77% gender equality and 58% female employment, Southeast Asia comes in second place. These numbers demonstrate how urbanization, education, and laws that support female participation in a range of industries have an impact. In all regions, the male employment rate is still approximately 75%. South Asia is far behind, with a gender equality ratio of only 33% and a female employment-to-population ratio of only 25%. These discrepancies, which lead to low female participation in formal employment, are primarily caused by financial constraints, educational opportunities, and cultural standards. As East and Southeast Asia continue to make progress toward gender parity, South Asia continues to struggle to reduce these discrepancies.

Sectoral Employment Trends Despite declines in the past, employment in Asia remains heavily gendered, with women concentrated in the "service" and "agriculture" sectors, while men are overrepresented in "industry." The proportion of women working in agriculture across much of Asia fell between 2014 and 2024 due to industrialization and urbanisation; agriculture remains a major source of employment for women in rural South and Southeast Asia. For instance, women occupy 55 percent of the employment opportunities in South Asia in agriculture against men's 40 percent employment in agriculture. Generally, this has been considered a form of "feminization of agriculture." Paralleling, the growth of service industries to reach 42 percent in East Asia and 36 percent in Southeast Asia reveal, however slow, the labour transition from traditional occupations into modern ones.

4.1. Informal Employment

In most Asian countries, a large share of women is in informal employment status associated with low pay, lack

of job security, and meagre social protection. In South Asia, over 75 percent of women's employment is informal, and the majority consists of contributing family workers or self-employed under precarious conditions. In East and Southeast Asia, where formal employment is more extensive, women in informal employment outnumber men. These gendered patterns of informal employment reflect persistent barriers to formal labour market inclusion for women.

4.2. Vulnerable Employment

Contributing family work and own-account work are disproportionately high for women in Asia. For instance, in South Asia, it is estimated that 72 percent of women and 48 percent of men are in vulnerable employment. In Southeast Asia, the respective figures are 63 percent and 42 percent. This overrepresentation of women in vulnerable employment perpetuates gendered income inequalities and restrains their economic empowerment.

4.3. Entrepreneurship and Leadership

However, women's entrepreneurship in the Asian region is still rather underrepresented. Compared to men-owned enterprises, most women-owned enterprises are very small, with few employees and lower revenues. The case is such because the structural issues of access to credit, finance, and markets continue to stand as obstacles to female entrepreneurship. Less than 5 percent of women entrepreneurs operating businesses in South Asia hire any paid employees, showing tremendous potential for further contribution toward economic growth that women-led enterprises can make.

In the last ten years, from 2014 to 2024- progress on gender equality in employment has been rather modest in Asia. The increasing female participation in the labour market, amidst economic growth and social changes, was noted in countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines. However, progress was not distributed uniformly across all countries. Countries that have supporting policies in labour-including infrastructure for childcare and maternal benefits exhibit progress more rapidly.

These are some pretty impressive gains, but serious challenges remain. Cultural attitudes, lack of access to education, and the poor application of laws against gender equality along with cultural norms endure as impediments, especially in South Asia. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic downturns hit women disproportionately hard, forcing many out of the labour market and deepening preexisting disparities.

Throughout Asia, advancing gender equality in the workplace will require comprehensive and targeted measures like:

1. Expanding Education and Skill Development: Ensuring high-quality education and vocational training, particularly for women and girls in rural regions.

2. Improvement of Family Support and Childcare Systems: It will be necessary to create an affordable childcare infrastructure with appropriate maternity and paternity leave to potentially promote the employment of women.

3. Increasing Legal Protection: Reduce pay disparities and unfair workplace practices by ensuring that equal pay and anti-discrimination laws are in effect.

4. Women in Decision-Making Positions: To close the gender gap in decision-making, implement incentives or quotas for women in top leadership and managerial roles.

5. Improving Access to Finance: To support the expansion of company ventures, give female entrepreneurs access to credit facilities and financing.

Unlocking the economic potential of women, fostering inclusive growth, and making further progress toward the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals are particularly dependent on addressing these challenges within Asian countries. Reducing gender disparities in employment, other than being an ethical necessity, is an economic necessity to ensure the long-term prosperity of the region.

5. Gender (In)equality in Employment in Asian Countries

Recent literature identifies some of the main determinants of gender equality in employment in Asia, which include economic development, globalization, demographic trends, macroeconomic policies, infrastructure availability, education, cultural norms and perception, and political systems. These factors determine the nature and extent of women's engagement in labour markets across the region, with progress considered to vary by country and even more so by subregion.

Evidence shows that female labour force participation in Asia follows a U-shaped trajectory with economic development. Early in development, women's participation tends to decline due to men's access to education and technology displacing women in the workforce (Boserup, 1970). However, as economies progress, access to education and employment opportunities for women increases, resulting in a rebound in female labour force participation (Goldin, 1995; Bloom et al., 2009). The dynamics of this are seen in countries like India and Indonesia, where recent economic growth, together with policy interventions, has triggered modest increases in female workforce participation.

Eastin and Prakash (2013) thus predict an "S-shaped" relationship between economic development and gender equality in Asia. In the early stages, development tends to lead to better employment opportunities for women, but once a country reaches a higher development status, structural barriers, labour market stratification, and the persistence of gender norms often cause temporary setbacks. In the advanced stage, greater educational attainment and changing cultural values, along with technological

development, enable women to attain highly paid and diversified employment opportunities as observed in countries such as South Korea and Japan.

Globalization has resulted in various impacts on gender equality in employment in the entire Asian continent. Foreign direct investment and trade integration have opened up new avenues for women, especially in export-oriented industries like textiles, electronics, and services (Oostendorp, 2009).

FDI has also been said to increase the existing gender-related inequalities in some Asian economies. Sometimes, MNCs foster occupational segregation, locating women mainly in subcontracted jobs or those that require low-skilled labour. Besides, the orientation towards economic integration led to a decline in state revenues to fund social programs, disproportionately affecting women who are heavily dependent on such services. In South and Southeast Asia, where informal employment is prevalent, this is especially noticeable. Religious and cultural beliefs continue to have a significant impact on women's employment throughout Asia (Banerjee, 2019). economic activity is restricted in many parts of South Asia and Central Asia by patriarchal attitudes, particularly in rural areas. In nations like Pakistan and Afghanistan, women's participation in the labour field is restricted by social norms around their duties as homemakers and carers (Nazneen et al., 2019). Progressive legal systems in nations like Malaysia and Indonesia, however, have demonstrated that legislative actions can upend long-standing conventions and advance gender equality in the workplace.

Among the most important elements influencing gains in Asian women's labour force participation are educational attainment and falling fertility rates. Rising female educational attainment has created prospects for higher-paying jobs and greater labour market engagement in nations like China, Japan, and South Korea. Despite cultural pressures, women with higher levels of education are more likely to enter and remain in the workforce, according to research by Bloom et al. (2009) and Cipollone et al. (2012). Even more significantly, declining fertility rates throughout most of Asia, particularly in East Asia, have allowed more women to join the workforce and relieved many of the responsibilities associated with raising children. As far as improving gender equality in the workplace is concerned, Asian democratic systems have yielded conflicting outcomes. Democratic institutions have been used by some nations, such as Taiwan and the Philippines, to enact redistribution policies and boost social expenditure on childcare, healthcare, and education, all of which benefit women. Progress has been slower in nations with poor governance systems or little political will, such as certain South Asian nations (Lo Bue. Et al., 2024). Despite these advancements, significant gender gaps in employment possibilities dominate Asia's labour markets. Instead of pursuing a position in traditional salaried employment, women frequently participate in more informal jobs. Despite

having advanced degrees, women in many developed economies, such as South Korea and Japan, still face the "glass ceiling" that prevents them from rising to positions of great authority. In many Asian countries, too, the feminisation of agriculture continues, with women dominating agricultural employment while men move to non-agricultural sectors. This pattern reinforces gender-specific vulnerabilities since women often lack access to land ownership, credit, and technology.

6. The Model and Data

This section discusses the econometric analysis of the determinants of gender equality in employment across Asian countries, based on recent cross-sectional and time-series data from 2014 to 2024. The model considers the data of 30 major Asian economies intending to understand the key drivers of gender equality in employment. The dependent variable is the female-to-male employment ratio (ages 15–64), expressed as a percentage. This measure focuses on the gap between the sexes in the availability of employment opportunities. Increasing values indicate increasing gender equality. The various drivers under analysis are economic, demographic, institutional, and those concerning globalization.

$$\log GE_{it} = \alpha_i + \beta_1 \log(\text{rgdp}_{it}) + \beta_2 \log(\text{rgdp}_{it}^2) + \beta_3 \log(\text{dmcry}_{it}) + \beta_4 \log(\text{dmcry}_{it}^2) + \beta_5 \log(K_{it}) + \beta_6 \log(S_{it})$$

($i = 1, \dots, N$; $t = 1, \dots, T$)

where α_i is a fixed effect that reflects time differences between nations, and GE is the measure of gender equality in the country i at time t ; The coefficient of democracy, dmcry , is represented by β_3 , the coefficient of the quadratic of democracy by β_4 , and the elasticity of gender equality to real per capita income, or rgdp , by β_1 and β_2 respectively. S stands for year, sub-regional dummies used as fixed effects; e is an error term that includes errors in the gender equality measure; K is the control variables, which include domestic investment (inv), foreign direct investment (fdi), higher school enrolment ratio (higher), university enrolment ratio (unenrol), urban population share (urban), and sex population ratio (poprto). To determine whether South Asia is different, we employ the South Asian dummy with its estimation.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Variables, 2014–2024

Variables	Obs.	Mean	Std. dev.
Gender equality in employment	950	71,82	21,72
Real GDP per capita	920	962,75	1247,39
Democracy	926	1,08	20,58
Domestic investment-GDP	940	21,93	10,87
FDI-GDP	953	2,79	8,62
Higher education	716	91,48	24,18
University education	628	32,17	29,37
Urban population share	1016	27,35	13,75
Sex population ratio	972	0,91	0,07

7. Model Estimation Results and Analysis

Table 2. Below Presents the Results of Estimating Gender Equality in the Employment Equation for Asian Countries From 2014 to 2024.

Variables	Central Asia	Northern Asia	Southeast Asia	Western Asia
Real GDP per capita	(-6,19) (2,19*)	(-3,48) (-1,43**)	5,37 (2,17*)	(-2,63) (-1,94***)
Real GDP per capita ²			8,467 (3,91**)	
Democracy	0,754 (3,47**)	0,931 (4,18***)	1,42 -0,27	0,617 (2,96**)
Democracy ²	0,209 (4,15***)	0,335 (3,72**)	0,91 (1,49**)	0,106 (2,03**)
Domestic investment-GDP	(-1,217) (-2,51**)	(-2,421) (-1,97**)	0,127 (3,47***)	(-1,603) (-1,83**)
FDI-GDP	1,267 (-0,735**)	0,975 (-1,457**)	3,578 42,37	1,964 (-0,284**)
Higher education	1,078 (3,075***)	2,857 (3,712***)	4,791 (7,034**)	2,467 (3,497**)
University education	0,127 (-0,415***)	0,425 (-0,972**)	5,193 (3,887**)	3,451 (2,618***)
Urban population share	31,967 (6,784***)	47,102 (8,019***)	21,643 (4,748**)	30,807 (5,794**)
Sex population ratio	1,127 (0,249***)	1,455 (0,3781***)	2,914 (1,782**)	1,978 (1,237**)

Northern Asia		(-12,781)		
		(-8,15 ^{***})		
Southern Asia			28,138	
			(19,27 ^{***})	
Central Asia	30,157			
	(18,42 ^{***})			
Western Asia				13,214
				(2,924 ^{**})
Constant	218,716	203,517	591,038	408,197
	(18,903 ^{***})	(13,712 ^{***})	(16,718 ^{**})	(13,417 ^{**})
R-squared	0,7168	0,6124	0,9849	0,7841
Adjusted R-squared	0,6913	0,5491	0,9637	0,7682
F-statistic	34,84	14,85	38,01	16,72
Prob>F	0,0000	0,0000	0,0000	0,0000
N	675	618	682	627

Empirical estimates for 2014-2024, based on the latest available data, highlight key trends and challenges toward gender equality in employment within Asian regions. In East and Southeast Asia, increased urbanization, higher levels of education, and gross domestic investment are strong enhancers of gender equality in employment. In South Asia, cultural constraints, inequitable access to education, and lack of formal job opportunities remain binding constraints to progress, despite economic growth and inflows of foreign direct investment. Economic growth is inclined to be associated with higher levels of gender equality in East and Southeast Asia because of the increasing urban labour market participation and increased access to education and health. In South Asia, this is less evident as the patriarchal norms impede the entry of women into the labour market. In North and East Asia, urbanization has redefined gender roles, with women taking on professional and managerial jobs. In these regions, policies have aimed at urban infrastructure and public services that facilitate female employment, such as childcare and safe transportation.

While digital technologies have rapidly spread new avenues for women's employment in e-commerce and IT-enabled services, automation in manufacturing and low-skilled sectors has replaced female workers more than others. In South Asia, limited digital access and skills development are widening the gender gap. Policymakers must give priority to digital inclusion and invest in vocational training to align women's skills with the requirements of the digital economy.

Expanding higher and university education significantly raises women's workforce participation in East and Southeast Asia. However, in South Asia, only primary education does not provide significant returns because of the lack of congruence between the educational outcomes and the requirements of the labour market. Technical and vocational education and gender-sensitive educational reforms are critical to preparing women for emerging sectors such as renewable energy, technology, and

entrepreneurship.

South Asia's low female labour force participation rates, which are a result of enduring cultural barriers, call for focused solutions. It is possible to combat discriminatory conventions by incorporating gender equality ideas into school curricula and launching public awareness campaigns. The advancements in North and East Asia demonstrate that gender outcomes may be greatly enhanced by changing societal attitudes through the media, community involvement, and laws supporting women in leadership roles. To enable women to enter or remain in formal employment, Asian nations must also increase their investments in affordable child care and transportation infrastructure. This endeavor will be further enhanced by the promotion of public-private initiatives, particularly in South and Southeast Asia. To attain gender equality, governments should quickly expand internet connectivity to remote areas, support initiatives for women's digital literacy, and offer incentives to female entrepreneurs in the technology sector. Institutional changes and open governance are necessary to combat gender-based discrimination in the workplace. Affirmative action measures, such as quotas in political representation and leadership, and gender-responsive budgeting may facilitate acceleration. Policies that promote work-life balance, such as flexible work schedules, anti-harassment legislation, and maternity and paternity leave, are especially crucial for women's growing engagement in the workforce. These have been effectively adopted in nations such as Japan and South Korea. Engaging males in gender equality, promoting women's voices in public and political arenas, and showcasing gender parity success stories in the media are all long-term initiatives to break down cultural obstacles. The natural resource-rich nations of Indonesia and most of Central Asia would benefit from diverse economies and job possibilities that include women. It's critical to guarantee transparency and accountability in the industry. Asian countries should boost domestic income

collection in light of the drop in foreign aid by implementing fair taxation policies and efficient public financial management that may direct these funds toward

development initiatives tailored to the needs of distinct genders.

Table 3: Determinants of Gender Equality in Asia

Level of Economic Development	1. Negative effect: At lower GDP per capita, gender equality in employment decreases	South Korea, Japan: Transition to service economies improved gender equality
	2. Positive effect: Beyond a GDP threshold, economic development narrows the gender gap	Aligns with Boserup (1970); and contrasts with Chen (2004) and Eastin & Prakash (2013).
	3. U-shaped relationship observed in East Asia	
Institutionalized Democracy	1. Positive and significant impact on gender equality	Democracies like India, Indonesia, and the Philippines show positive impacts
	2. Effect accelerates as democracies mature	Central Asia: Limited representation and access for women in authoritarian regimes.
	3. Insignificant in authoritarian regimes.	
Domestic Investment	1. Positively associated with gender equality across all sub-regions	Vietnam, Bangladesh: Investments in labour-intensive industries and vocational training improved gender parity
	2. Drives job creation and economic empowerment for women.	
Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)	1. Positive effect: In export-oriented industries (e.g., textiles in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Bangladesh)	Sectoral distribution of FDI is critical for gender equality outcomes.
	2. Negative effect: In capital-intensive sectors (e.g., mining in Kazakhstan and Indonesia).	
Education	1. Primary education: Positive impact in South/Southeast Asia, improving literacy and employability	Secondary education in China and South Korea boosts labour force participation
	2. Secondary education: Greater impact in East/Central Asia, enabling formal employment	Higher education is critical in Japan and Singapore for professional gender equality.
	3. Higher education: Reduces gaps in professional roles	
Demographic Factors	1. Urbanization: Positive impact across all sub-regions, expanding opportunities and services	Rapid urbanization in India and Indonesia enhances economic opportunities
	2. Female-to-male ratio: Negative impact in South/Southeast Asia due to structural barriers.	Cultural barriers limit female participation despite higher population ratios in South/Southeast Asia
Sub-Regional and Resource Effects	1. South Asia: Highest inequality due to cultural norms and restrictive laws	Oil-exporting countries like Kazakhstan show greater inequality
	2. East/Southeast Asia: Greater parity due to education and urbanization	UAE demonstrates that governance can mitigate resource-curse effects on gender equality.
	3. Central Asia: Gender gaps persist in resource-heavy industries.	

The realization of these recommendations requires political will and sustained commitment. As witnessed in East and Southeast Asia, countries that place gender equity at the centre of national development plans realize significant economic and social dividends. Collaboration among governments, private sectors, and civil society organizations can advance this process, making Asia an inclusive growth region with equality between men and women.

7.1 Level of Economic Development

In the general sample of Asia as well as in several subregional samples such as South Asian and Southeast Asian economies, the coefficient for real GDP per capita is estimated to be negative and statistically significant. However, it wears a positive and statistically significant quadratic term in GDP per capita in the East Asian subregional grouping, indicating thereby that a U-shaped

curve fitted between economic development and female equality in employment. What it implies is that, as human beings, at lower levels of economic development, gender equality in employment decreases with an increase in GDP per capita, while beyond a threshold value for GDP per capita, economic growth at higher levels of economic development contributes positively to reduced employment gender gaps.

For example, the structural change from manufacturing to service-oriented economies in East Asian economies like South Korea and Japan has greatly enhanced gender equality. This finding confirms Boserup's hypothesis of 1970 yet contradicts the findings from earlier studies by Chen (2004) and Eastin and Prakash (2013), which reported mixed trends for other regions.

7.2 Institutionalized Democracy

Institutionally consolidated democracy tends to have a positive and significant effect on gender equality in employment across most Asian countries, in particular democracies like India, Indonesia, and the Philippines. This is further reinforced by the fact that the quadratic term for democracy is significant: as democratic institutions mature, their influence on gender equality is accelerating.

This therefore supports the assertion that democratic governance facilitates inclusive labour market policies through the promotion of female education, maternity benefits, and workplace rights. In some Central Asian authoritarian regimes, though, the influence of democracy on gender equality is still statistically insignificant due to poor political representation and limited access to jobs by women.

7.3 Domestic Investment

Gender equality in employment is positively and significantly associated with the domestic investment rate for all Asian sub-regions. Countries such as Vietnam and Bangladesh that have directed domestic investment in labour-intensive industries and vocational training exhibit greater equality of employment. This result supports the hypothesis that domestic investment is essential for job creation and resource allocation to projects that empower women economically.

7.4 Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)

The FDI-to-GDP ratio has mixed results. In South and Southeast Asia, FDI is positively and significantly associated with gender equality in employment, especially in countries like Cambodia, Vietnam, and Bangladesh, where FDI in export-oriented industries such as textiles and garments has provided women with employment opportunities.

On the other hand, for the resource-rich countries, Kazakhstan and Indonesia, the impact of FDI on gender equality is negative and statistically significant since FDI in capital-intensive sectors such as mining reinforces pre-existing gender disparities. These results suggest that the sectoral distribution of FDI is critical in determining its impact on gender equality.

7.5 Education

The contribution of education to equality in employment is relatively mixed across different regions and levels of education.

- Primary education has a positive and significant influence on gender equality in the case of South and Southeast Asia, reflecting improvements in female literacy and basic employability skills.
- Secondary education is more equalizing in gender in East and Central Asia, where higher enrollment rates in secondary are associated with higher female labour force

participation. For instance, countries like China and South Korea require secondary education to give women the required skills for formal employment.

- Contrastingly, higher education is still vital to reduce the gap in managerial and professional jobs. Even countries with the best tertiary educational systems, such as Japan and Singapore, have better scores on the labour market from a gender viewpoint. The results confirm targeted investments in technical and vocational education as one of the paths to close the gender divide.

7.6 Demographic Factors

Demographic factors are also important for the level of urbanization and the ratio between female and male populations:

- The rates of urbanization are positively and significantly associated with gender equality in employment across all Asian sub-regions. Urban areas provide greater access to formal labour markets, diverse job opportunities, and support services such as childcare. For example, rapid urbanization in countries like India and Indonesia has expanded economic opportunities for women.
- The female-to-male population ratio, however, exerts a negative and statistically significant impact in South and Southeast Asia. It suggests that though the population is dominated by more women, the cultural and structural bottlenecks impede their labour market participation.

7.7 Sub-Regional and Resource Effects

The fixed effects for sub-regional have brought out striking contrasts in the progress of gender equality in Asia:

- South Asia has the widest chasm in employment between men and women due to cultural reasons, less access to education, and poor labour laws in countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan. East Asia and Southeast Asia have a relative balance in gender, partly because of higher educational levels, urbanization, and decent labour laws. In Central Asia, gender disparity is high, because heavy industries are oriented toward the extraction of resources.

8. Conclusion

Empirical evidence between 2014 and 2024 highlights the complex dynamics of gender equality in employment within Asia. The region exhibits marked heterogeneity, where East and Southeast Asia have made significant strides, but South Asia still grapples with deep-seated challenges. Economic growth within East and Southeast Asia has catalyzed transformative shifts in gender roles, primarily through urbanization, increased access to education, and robust public infrastructure investments. In countries like Vietnam and South Korea, urbanization facilitated more women into labour and managerial jobs, supported by baby-friendly policies, and facilitated access to safer mass public transportation facilities. It reveals that urban design and planned policies are responsible for changing gender equity.

However, despite remarkable economic progress and foreign direct investment, the situation in South Asia is very different, with patriarchal traditions and limited female mobility still serving as significant obstacles to entering the workforce. If economic advances are not translated into gender-equal outcomes, specific measures that address these ingrained structural and cultural barriers are required (Petrongolo and Ronchi, 2020). Gender-responsive employment legislation, legal protection against workplace discrimination, and measures that promote women's safety and mobility are all necessary to close these gaps. The region runs the risk of continuing a vicious cycle of undervaluing and excluding female talent from its official employment markets if they are not there.

Gender equality has become both a challenge and a motivator of the digital economy. Particularly in urban areas with sophisticated digital infrastructure, the spread of digital technology has opened up new career opportunities for women. Although many nations, such as Malaysia and Singapore, have been successful in integrating women into industries like e-commerce and IT-enabled services through digital inclusion programs, automation has resulted in the replacement of a large number of women in traditionally female-dominated, low-skilled sectors, creating even more inequality (Ahmad et al., 2024). The disparity in access to technology and low levels of digital literacy in South Asia have made this divide even more pronounced. To prepare women for the shifting demands of a job market that is changing quickly, policymakers should prioritise funding digital literacy, vocational training, and technological access (Dias, 2021).

One of the most significant factors influencing gender equality is still education, and East and Southeast Asia continue to benefit from increased access to secondary and postsecondary education. This is making higher-paying, knowledge-intensive jobs more accessible to women in nations like Thailand and Japan. Nonetheless, South Asia still faces challenges in transforming school attendance into substantial economic engagement of women. Sensitive educational reform procedures are needed to address this mismatch between labour market demands and educational performance. To close the gap and increase women's employability, skill and vocational education training must be provided, especially in high-growth fields like digital technology and renewable energy.

According to empirical data for the years 2014-2024, there are visible regional disparities concerning gender equality in employment across Asia in the analysis. These include disparity as a result of factors such as economic development, education, political regimes, and investment patterns. While East and Southeast Asia urbanized, made domestic investments, and achieved wider access to higher education, gender equality thrived; delayed cultural norms and poor job opportunities along with low access to digital technologies hampered South Asia's efforts. The U-shaped relationship between GDP per capita and gender equality

indicates that at higher development levels, economic growth narrows employment gaps, much like the transition to service economies seen in Japan and South Korea. "Institutionalized democracy" promotes inclusive labour policies, whereas authoritarian regimes, still in Central Asia, show persistent gaps. Domestic investment promotes gender equality with most regard to labour-intensive sectors, while that of FDI is sector-dependent, being beneficial to export-oriented activities such as textiles but harmful to capital-intensive ones like mining. Education remains an important pivot, with primary and secondary education increasing the employment chances of individuals in South and Southeast Asia whereas tertiary education remains a determinant of leadership positions in advanced economies. Increased opportunities in formal labour markets made available by urbanization are contradicted by high female-to-male population ratios in South Asia with low labour force participation as a result of social barriers. Policy measures such as digital inclusion, childcare infrastructure, vocational training, and public-private partnerships need to be put into place to help rectify these inequalities. Ultimately, continuing political will, protocols, rules, and investments would be important in engendering reforms around gender sensitivity and, therefore, transforming this region into one of equity in growth and opportunity for women.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Making gender-sensitive urbanisation strategies a top priority is necessary to close the gender-related job gaps in Asia. Hence, to integrate women into formal labour markets, investments in urban infrastructure must include not only reasonably priced child care but also dependable public transport and workplace safety. Women can engage in income-generating activities and further their careers in the supportive atmosphere so provided, particularly in metropolitan areas where labour demand is strongest (Jayachandran, 2021). Governments may assure inclusive economic growth by improving access to urban services, which in turn reduces structural barriers to female involvement. Women are disproportionately affected by these hurdles. Countries like South Korea and Singapore have adopted policies similar to this, which have significantly increased the number of women in the workforce and economic productivity (Bryan et al., 2023).

Taking steps to close the digital divide is another crucial tactic. Improvement in the accessibility of digital literacy programs, especially in rural areas, would, therefore, create an enabling environment for women to participate in the rapidly expanding digital economy across Asia. Beyond that, incentives toward entrance into technology-focused industries would go a long way in addressing the gender gap in high-demand sectors like e-commerce, information technology, and renewable energy. Vocational training programs geared to equip women with technical and digital skills in line with the needs of green technologies and an advanced economy should be policy priorities. In this case, it would enhance both employability and the future

possibility for women to become participants in and beneficiaries of Asia's current digital transformation process.

Finally, institutional and cultural change needs to support sustainability in the progress already achieved toward gender equality in the workplace. Governments must apply gender-sensitive labour policies, which include affirmative action programs and integration of gender considerations into national development plans (Bredtmann and Otten, 2023). Such frameworks in resource-rich countries will create more diversified economic activities and give women opportunities to engage in non-traditional sectors like mining and energy. Public campaigns against discriminatory norms, coupled with strategies to increase women's leadership and participation in public and private sectors, can transform societal attitudes and dismantle structural barriers to equality. Reinforcing institutional frameworks coupled with cultural transformation will allow Asian countries to achieve substantive and lasting gender equality in employment.

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