



# Gender, the Environment and Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific

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# **Gender, the Environment and Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific**

## Foreword



### **T**HE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IS A VISIONARY COVENANT FOR HUMAN PROGRESS.

This aspirational agenda is built on the idea of “leaving no one behind” in the journey towards inclusive and sustainable development. Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls are decisive factors in transforming this vision into a reality, particularly in Asia and the Pacific where only 5 of 53 ESCAP member States have achieved a low level of gender equality according to the Gender Inequality Index

The lives of a significant portion of the women are inextricably tied to the use of the environment for daily support and livelihood in our region. Nearly 58 per cent of the economically active women work in the agriculture sector. Women constitute 54 per cent of the labour force in small-scale inland fisheries. And more than 80 per cent of rural households rely on biomass for fuel, which affects a preponderance of women. Environmental depletion and climate induced changes add increased pressures on women’s time, income, health, nutrition and social support systems. For sustainable development to become a reality, it is incumbent on policymakers to envision growth strategies that recognise and respond to the gender-based realities in the sphere of managing the environment and natural resources.

*Gender, the Environment and Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific* is the first Asia-Pacific report that comprehensively maps out the intersections between gender and environment at the levels of household, work, community and policy. This publication examines gender in the spheres of food security, agriculture, energy, water, fisheries and forestry. It identifies the strategic points for policy interventions. Based on a grounded study of the reality in the Asia-Pacific region, this report assembles good practices and policy lessons that could be capitalized on to advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in our region.

The report draws five policy-relevant conclusions on the relationship between gender and the environment:

- First, persistent gender inequalities threaten to exacerbate maintaining food security in our region. Women play a pivotal role in all three dimensions of food security—availability, accessibility and utilization of food. Their role in these dimensions also intersects with the responsibilities, opportunities and constraints they face in their households, at work and within their communities. Climate-induced weather variations coupled with deforestation require women and girls to travel greater distances to collect food and water and thereby divert time that could otherwise be used for income-generating activity. Worsening constraints will not only increase women’s time burdens, but also threaten to reduce nutrition for women and impact the educational attainment of girl children.
- Second, structural biases must be eliminated to enable women to thrive in agriculture. The majority of the economically active women in the Asia-Pacific region work in the agriculture sector, and rural outmigration of men has led to the feminization of agricultural labour force. However, structural factors have restricted women farmers’ access to credit, irrigation and extension services and thereby negatively affected productivity. If women had access to and control of the same resources as men, their contributions would increase food production by 2.5–4 per cent, which would be enough to move 150 million people out of hunger and poverty across the developing world. With more than 60 per cent of the undernourished or chronically hungry people in the world living in Asia and the Pacific, it is therefore imperative that we redress access barriers to enable women to thrive in agriculture.

- Third, clean energy has transformative potential to enhance productivity, health outcomes, and relieve the burden of housework. The Asia-Pacific region today has at least 455 million people who lack access to electricity and more than 2 billion people still relying on biomass, or solid fuel, for cooking. Women, especially in rural areas, bear the brunt of energy poverty and are heavily impacted by the reliance on biomass, which is the single most important feature of the energy mix in the region. The lack of access to clean, reliable energy exacerbates the many challenges women face on a daily basis.
- Fourth, integrating gender concerns into policy making in agriculture, energy, water, fisheries and forestry sectors is critical to addressing gender disparity and enhancing women's access to resources and economic empowerment. Actions to advance gender mainstreaming at the policy and programme levels include gender analysis and establishing gender targets and indicators within specific sectors, along with gender-responsive budgeting to support the equitable distribution of resources.
- Finally, empowering women and creating enabling environments to foster women's effective participation and leadership in the management of environmental resources will positively influence conservation and resource efficiency. Women's participation and leadership are outcome-changing factors for the sustainable management of resources. Country-specific evidence in this report reinforces how empowering women in local decision-making over the conservation of forests and fisheries leads to better resource efficiency and conservation. Women's leadership will make a difference in the sustainable management of resources, which is why the sociocultural factors that impede their ability to lead must be recognized.

In our collective quest for a more balanced development strategy that propels economic growth, protects the environment and advances social development, we must ensure half of the population is not left behind. I hope that this report will be read with interest and help stimulate further action to address critical gender concerns in the advancement of the Sustainable Development Agenda.



**Shamshad Akhtar**

Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and  
Executive Secretary of ESCAP

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## Executive summary

The lives of a significant portion of the population in the Asia-Pacific region are inextricably tied to the use of environment for daily support and livelihood, especially women's lives. For instance, more than 80 per cent of rural households in the region use biomass for fuel, compared with only 25 per cent of urban households, which affects a preponderance of women more than men. Around 58 per cent of the economically active women in the region are in the agriculture sector. Women constitute 54 per cent of the labour force in small-scale inland fisheries in the region. If the agenda of sustainable development is to advance in this region, countries need to understand—and then respond to—the gender-based realities (including inequalities and disparities) in the sphere of managing the environment and natural resources.

This report looks at gender inequalities as they relate to food and nutrition security and to the agriculture, energy, water, fisheries and forestry sectors in the Asia-Pacific region. The following captures the key messages and policy lessons that could guide policymakers, private sector leaders and other actors involved in the gender and environmental arenas.

**The gender-environment intersection is key to promote the advancement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.** The 2030 Agenda and the associated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set the foundation for comprehensive and integrated action on environmental sustainability. With the focus of these goals to leave no one behind, addressing environmental concerns must consider inequality and exclusion between men and women—the social dimensions of sustainable development. The socially

have direct impacts on lowering the nutritional status, thus making children and women vulnerable to nutritional deficits. Climate change-induced weather variations, coupled with deforestation, require greater distance to be travelled to collect food and water from safe sources, thus diverting time that would otherwise be used for income-generating activities, community activities or simply for leisure. Women and girls who travel farther from home to find food and water are also at risk of sexual harassment. In households that reduce non-food expenditures in response to rising food costs, young and adolescent girls are likely to be pulled out of school, while available funds are likely to be redirected to educate boys. Policies in the region must address the three dimensions of food security—availability, accessibility and utilization, while also acknowledging the gendered aspects of these dimensions, which impact the health and nutritional status of children and women.

**Alleviate structural biases so that women can thrive in agriculture.** Although the majority of the economically active women in the Asia-Pacific region engage in agriculture, less than 20 per cent of women hold secure tenure to the lands they farm. Structural factors impede women's access to credit, mechanical equipment, irrigation facilities and extension services, in turn having a negative effect on agricultural productivity. Waged employment in commercial agriculture and export-based agriculture is beset with low remuneration and insecure conditions of work, which push women further into vulnerable positions. It is widely acknowledged that if women had access to and control of the same opportunities and resources as men, their contributions would increase food production by as little as 2.5 per cent and by as much as 4 per cent—enough to move 150 million people out of hunger and

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