



PATHWAYS TO INFLUENCE

Promoting the Role of Women's Transformative Leadership to Achieve the SDGs in Asia and the Pacific

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Preface

The twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, in September 2020, turns the global spotlight on the historic commitments made by world leaders to a comprehensive agenda promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. At the centre of the Beijing Platform of Action is a commitment to equal representation of women in leadership and decision-making roles in all spheres. Indeed, the Beijing Platform of Action states that without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspective at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has generated renewed momentum for the advancement of the Beijing outcomes, with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 ("Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls") widely recognized as a requisite for achieving the agenda as a whole. A critical driver for progress is SDG target 5.5 on promoting and strengthening equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

Despite the advancements since 1995, a gap between the visionary commitments of Beijing and the realities of gender disparities in leadership across the Asia-Pacific region remains stark. The representation of women in the region's parliaments, the area where data are the most up to date and reliable, illustrate the disparities that can be found across all facets of society. In 2019, the average representation of women in lower or single houses of parliament in Asia and the Pacific, at 20 per cent, lagged behind the global average of 25 per cent. Women filled only 12 per cent of the 978 ministerial posts across the region. (ESCAP calculations based on IPU data as of September 2019).

Just as important as achieving gender parity (at least) in leadership and decision-making roles is the quality and impact of that leadership. Recognizing the multiple barriers that women face to becoming and remaining influential as leaders in all countries of the region, this report thus focuses on women's transformative leadership. Drawing on original interview perspectives blended with other available research, the report examines the qualities that distinguish transformative women leaders from others as well as critical factors that enable or constrain their emergence. Two qualities of women's transformative leadership that stand out are the empowerment of other women to emerge as leaders and a focus on shifting power imbalances in favour of those who are most left behind. Such leadership is vital to the building of inclusive, equitable and sustainable societies across the region, in line with the 2030 Agenda commitments of "transforming our world".

While celebrating the countless women in Asia and the Pacific who are already providing transformative leadership within their families, communities, workplaces, societies, wider region and beyond, this report highlights four proven pathways for expanding the presence and influence of such leaders:

- Ensuring opportunities for women and girls to develop the individual consciousness and capabilities that will help orient them to participate in society and leadership.
- Ensuring equal and full access to resources and opportunities through education, associational life and economic empowerment.
- Reshaping and leveraging the legal frameworks, formal policies and rules that underlie systems and institutions.
- Transforming discriminatory gender-based social norms that exclude women and girls from leadership positions.

Each pathway provides insights into priority areas for policy development, investment and action by governments, as well as by international, civil society and other organizations in Asia and the Pacific.

In adopting the Regional Road Map for Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific, member States of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific committed themselves to placing “gender equality and women’s empowerment as a central issue of the regional policy agenda, in order to enhance women’s leadership and decision-making in all aspects of society”.

As detailed in the findings and recommendations of this report, the region’s governments have an essential role in fostering an enabling environment for women’s leadership development as a requisite step towards meeting the call of United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres for “wholesale, rapid, and radical change” to achieve gender equality.

This report was prepared under the auspices of the United Nations Asia-Pacific Thematic Working Group for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. The United Nations community in Asia and the Pacific is committed to working with member States and other actors in the region to achieve gender parity in leadership across all spheres and foster the emergence of more transformative women leaders who can help drive the full realization of the SDGs.

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The study was undertaken in close collaboration with the United Nations Asia-Pacific Thematic Working Group for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. A task team was established by the Thematic Working Group to provide peer review, guidance, advice and practical support for the study. The following United Nations agencies were represented on the task team: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO), United Nations Environment (UN Environment) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

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