Women’s participation in business in India:  
A comparison with other Asian countries

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Abstract- Advancing women’s equality in work and society represents one of the most sizable economic opportunities for the world. Advancing women’s equality not only is important from a moral and social perspective, but also delivers a considerable growth dividend. Gender inequality does not exist purely in the workplace it affects women’s life in society, too. This article reflects progress on gender equality in work and gender equality in society. Realising the power of parity will require addressing societal drivers of gender inequality in the workplace including education, health, attitudes towards women working outside the home, access to finance, and more access for women to the internet and the benefits of the digital revolution. The best-in-region scenario assumes that many women shift out of agriculture into industry and service sectors, narrowing gender productivity gaps, but achieving this shift will require investment: productivity boosting investment in agriculture (that is, losing workers), and investment to create jobs in the sectors to which women are migrating.

I. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
Gender outcomes in Asia Pacific appear to be closely tied to the stage of economic development. In its 2015 global report on the power of parity, a correlation analysis suggests that per capita GDP is strongly linked to almost all aspects of gender equality in society. Economic development in itself can create momentum towards a further narrowing of gender gaps, provided countries use the dividend of higher GDP growth to boost investment in social infrastructure, for example education and healthcare. However, relying on economic development alone is a slow process In Asia Pacific, economic development has a significant influence on gender equality outcomes but does not fully account for differences between countries (Exhibit 1).

II. GENDER EQUALITY IN WORK
This includes the ability of women to find employment and be compensated fairly for it, share unpaid care work equitably, have the skills and opportunity to perform higher-productivity jobs, and occupy leadership positions. Five indicators are included in this category: labour-force participation rate, professional and technical jobs, perceived wage gap for similar work, leadership positions, and unpaid care work.

III. LEGAL PROTECTION AND POLITICAL VOICE
This includes the right to work, access institutions, inherit assets, be protected from violence, and have the opportunity to participate actively in political life.

Economic Development Heavily Influences Gender Outcomes in Asia
Economic development has a significant influence on gender equality outcomes but does not fully account for differences between and within countries in Asia Pacific. Other factors at work include cultural attitudes and beliefs, and catalysts such as government action, technological development, market forces, and activism. These factors help to explain the significant variations in gender outcomes between and within Asia Pacific countries, and are often complex and mutually reinforcing: improvement on any of them is likely to have some positive impact on the others, creating a virtuous cycle (Exhibit 1).

Within gender equality in society, gender gaps in education are relatively narrow in most countries, although maternal mortality and financial and digital inclusion are significant improvement opportunities in most parts of South Asia and Southeast Asia. Sex ratio at birth is a stubborn issue in China, India, and Vietnam where the male-to-female ratio exceeds 1.10. Child marriage is a particularly common issue for girls and women in Bangladesh, and violence against women continues to be prevalent in many countries.

Cultural attitudes and beliefs
Attitudes can affect gender outcomes in work and in society. We have analysed the World Values Survey and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data and found a strong link between societal attitudes that limit women’s potential and gender-equality outcomes in a given region.
Government measures

Government measures whether in the form of legislation, fiscal measures, programmatic change, or public-private partnerships have the potential to influence gender outcomes directly, or indirectly by targeting society’s economic development or attitudes and beliefs. For instance, the government of Singapore has clearly contributed to the city-state’s progress on inequality in labour-force participation through a range of policies that help women to balance family responsibilities and work.

Exhibit 1:

Technology

In the digital age, technological developments are likely to be a major factor in accelerating progress towards parity if their full power is harnessed. On digital inclusion of women, Asia Pacific has a GPS of 0.77, somewhat behind the global average of 0.85. Just as mobile banking enables women to avoid long journeys to the ATM or bank, technology-enabled healthcare delivered via phone or tablet can reach women even in the remotest areas and save them time travelling to see a doctor.

Market forces

Competitive market forces can also be a positive catalyst for change. In technology, for example, market forces can make the internet more accessible to women. In 2015, 72 percent of women in India did not own a phone, compared with 57 percent of men, and in one survey half of Indian women said that the cost of a handset was the major reason. But prices are heading downwards—the average cost of a smart phone in India has already fallen 45 percent in the past five years, opening up the possibility of owning one for many more women and giving them a gateway to a range of services, from finance to healthcare and education. A key reason for prices dropping has been competition. In India, for instance, Reliance Jio was able to reduce prices of data and voice packages by investing heavily in 4G, and other companies cut their prices in order to compete.

Exhibit 2:

There has been significant progress towards gender equality in Asia Pacific over the past although not on labour-force participation.
Asia Pacific Countries Have Made Progress On Gender Equality In Recent Years, But There Is Still A Long Way To Go

The past decade has seen many advances in addressing gender inequality in society in Asia Pacific. South Asia and Southeast Asia in particular have achieved significant improvements in health and education outcomes, which are generally correlated with economic development. However, the picture on indicators of gender equality in work is more mixed, particularly on women’s participation in the labour force, on which some countries have advanced but others have regressed (Exhibit 2). China, the best-performing country in the region, stands out for its progress on this front.

While these improvements in health and education outcomes are closely correlated with economic development, progress can also be attributed to positive measures by governments and NGOs. For example, the Cambodia Health Equity Fund launched a voucher programme in 2007 to provide poor pregnant women with access to free pre- and postnatal care and delivery, while the government implemented a nationwide scheme to incentivise healthcare workers for live births in hospitals and healthcare centres.

### IV. GENDER INEQUALITY IN SEVEN ASIA PACIFIC COUNTRIES

**China:** In a best-in-region scenario, China could add $2.6 trillion or 13 percent above business as usual to annual GDP by 2025. China’s position on gender equality in work is above the average of Asia Pacific, with a relatively high female-to-male labour-force participation ratio and share of women in professional and technical jobs. China is best in region on unmet need for family planning and is near best in region on female-to-male ratio of educational attainment.
and on child marriage. However, China has some way to travel towards parity in leadership positions, unpaid care work, political representation, and sex ratio at birth, which is heavily skewed towards male children, a legacy of China’s one-child policy. Overall, there has been no substantial advance in women’s equality in recent years.

**India:** In a best-in-region scenario, India could add $770 billion to annual GDP by 2025, or 18 percent above business as usual. India has a considerable way to travel to reach the Asia Pacific average on female-to-male labour-force participation rate, maternal mortality, financial and digital inclusion, sex ratio at birth, and violence against women. In education, by contrast, gender gaps are narrowing fast. India also has some significant opportunities, such as access to digital technologies and, largely through their use, access to financial services and credit. In unpaid care work in the home women do roughly ten times as much as men India has made advances in rolling out household infrastructure that helps women. Building on this momentum and sharpening focus on how women can achieve greater economic empowerment are high potential priorities for India to consider.

**Japan:** Japan could add $325 billion to annual GDP by 2025, or 6 percent above business as usual, in a best-in-region scenario. Japan’s progresses towards gender parity in work are below the Asia Pacific average and considerably lower than best in region. There is considerable scope to boost the female-to-male ratio of labour-force participation and other indicators of gender equality in work. As the economy ages and the workforce shrinks, tapping the economic potential of women by increasing women’s representation in higher education, and subsequently in professional and technical jobs and company leadership positions, is vital.

**Singapore:** In a best-in-region scenario, Singapore could boost its GDP by $20 billion a year, or 5 percent. It has achieved an above-average level of gender equality in work. The women’s labour-force participation rate doubled from 28 percent in 1970 to 58 percent in 2016, reflecting a range of policies helping women to achieve work-life balance, including paid maternity leave, paid and unpaid childcare leave, increased tax relief, tax rebates, and childcare subsidies. Singapore’s level of gender equality in essential services and enablers of economic opportunity and in legal protection and political voice is in line with the Asia Pacific average.

**V. CONCLUSION**

India is moving in the right direction on empowering women, with the fastest progress on some dimensions of any country in Asia Pacific over the past ten years. Now India has an opportunity to build on this foundation by focusing not only on enabling more women to rise to leadership positions in the organised sector, but also on enabling women in the informal sector many of them in rural and urban microenterprises and in unpaid work to fulfill more of their economic potential. Each area of progress has opened up new scope for action. Access to the internet and digital technologies has soared. A potential next step for India is helping women develop their digital literacy and shifting societal attitudes that still militate against them making full use of these technologies, especially for income generation. India has made great strides in expanding the household infrastructure that can save so much of women’s time spent on household chores. The next stage is to ensure that women have access to affordable childcare so they can work for pay if they so choose. Tackling gender inequality is a complex, long-term challenge, and an ongoing search for new ways to unleash the potential of its women will be critical.

**REFERENCES**

9. The ASX corporate governance council gives a recommendation for listed entities to set measurable objectives for achieving gender diversity, disclose policies and objectives, and monitor progress. Based on data from the ILO for the sake of comparability with other countries.