

South and South-West Asia: An analysis of the Beijing+25 review reports

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ATIP: Anti Trafficking in Person
DAM: Department of Agriculture and Marketing
GBV: Gender Based Violence
GRB: Gender-responsive Budgeting
LGU: Local Government Units
MISP: Minimum Initial Service Package
NAPVAW: National Action Plan on Violence Against Women
NCWC: National Commission on Women and Children
SME: Small and Medium Enterprises
SOE: State Owned Enterprises
SOP: Standard Operating Procedure
SRH: Sexual and Reproductive health
STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TVET: Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UEC: Union Election Commission
VAWG: Violence against Women and Girls
WPS: Women, Peace and Security

Introduction

The world is in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic. Women health workers are at the forefront of the health response to the crisis. With lockdowns and curfews implemented in several parts of the world, the incidence of violence against women and girls has increased. Women are over-represented in sectors hardest hit by the outbreak such as manufacturing, garment, tourism, and hospitality sectors. Lastly, but most importantly, the burden of extra care work and domestic chores in light of the pandemic falls on the shoulders of an already over-burdened womenfolk. In short, the pandemic has exacerbated gender inequalities and discriminatory social norms that exist in our society.

The COVID-19 crisis is a wake-up call for our planet. It is relevant that we introspect our policies and deal with the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of development in an integrated manner. The Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are critical resources that member States could use to move forward without leaving anyone behind. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – with its commitment to leave no one behind – and the Beijing Platform – with its wide and far reaching scope – could together forge a more equal, inclusive planet. The synergies need to be harnessed to create a more gender-equal Asia and the Pacific.

The Asia-Pacific Beijing+25 Review

In 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted and subsequently endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly. Every five years since 1995, progress in achieving the strategic objectives of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is reviewed by the Commission on the Status of Women. The fifth review marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. In its resolution 2018/8, the Economic and Social Council called upon all States to undertake national-level reviews of the progress made and challenges encountered in the implementation of the Platform for Action. Additionally, the resolution encouraged “regional commissions to undertake regional reviews so that the outcomes of intergovernmental processes at the regional level can feed into the 2020 review”.

In accordance with this mandate, ESCAP, in cooperation with UN Women and with the support of the Asia-Pacific Regional Coordination Mechanism Thematic Working Group on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (RCM-TWG-GEEW), undertook in 2019 a [regional review](#) of progress in implementing the Platform for Action in Asia and the Pacific. Out of its 49 member States and 9 associate members, ESCAP received 45 reports. The analytical review encompassed ESCAP member States geographically located in the Asia-Pacific region.

The 25-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 2020 was the first time that the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was reviewed with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development fully in place. The Beijing+25 review harnesses the synergies between the Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda to consolidate efforts to accelerate the achievement of key international commitments on gender equality.

The 12 critical areas of concern of the Platform for Action have been clustered into six overarching themes that highlight the alignment of the two frameworks (see table 1): inclusive development, shared prosperity, and decent work; poverty eradication, social protection and social services; freedom from violence, stigma and stereotypes; participation, accountability and gender-responsive institutions; peaceful and inclusive societies; and environmental conservation, climate action, and resilience-building. In addition, member States have reported on their key priorities, achievements, and challenges with regard to gender equality; national institutions, processes and partnerships; and data and statistics for advancing the empowerment of women and girls in the region.

The present document contains a summary of the identified achievements, challenges, and key actions taken by the ESCAP members and associate members of the South and South West Asia sub-region to advance gender equality and women's empowerment. The countries that have submitted their national review reports¹, and are therefore included in this report, are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Turkey. Sri Lanka has submitted its national review report. Furthermore, the key priority areas for action for countries in the region for the next five years are identified, with a view to accelerate the achievement of gender equality in the region of progress in implementing the Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda.

Table 1 Linkages between the Beijing+25 Review, the Beijing Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda

Beijing +25 Clusters	Critical Areas of Concern	Sustainable Development Goals
<i>Inclusive development, shared prosperity, and decent work</i>	A. Women and poverty F. Women and the economy I. Human rights of women L. The girl child	SDGs 1, 2, 5, 8, 9 and 17
<i>Poverty eradication, social protection, and social services</i>	A. Women and poverty B. Education and training of women C. Women and health I. Human rights of women L. The girl child	SDGs 1,2, 3, 4 and 5
<i>Freedom from violence, stigma, and stereotypes</i>	D. Violence against women I. Human rights of women J. Women and the media L. The girl child	SDG 5
<i>Participation, accountability, and gender-responsive institutions</i>	G. Women in power and decision-making H. Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women I. Human rights of women J. Women and the media L. The girl child	SDGs 5, 16 and 17
<i>Peaceful and inclusive societies</i>	E. Women and armed conflict I. Human rights of women L. The girl child	SDGs 5, 10, 16, 17
<i>Environmental conservation, protection and rehabilitation</i>	K. Women and the environment I. Human rights of women L. The girl child	SDGs 5, 6, 7, 11, 12, 14, 15 and 17

¹ For the national review reports, see: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw64-2020/preparations> . (accessed 27/10/2020). Unless otherwise specified, all information reported in this document has been taken from the respective national review reports submitted by member States for the Beijing+25 Review.

Achievements and challenges

“It is time to stop trying to change women, and start changing the systems that prevent them from achieving their potential. Our power structures have evolved gradually over thousands of years. One further evolution is long overdue. The 21st century must be the century of women’s equality”

-UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres²

The following section reviews the key achievements of the countries in the sub-region with respect to advancing gender equality over the last five years and challenges faced in its pursuit.

Achievements:

Women’s economic empowerment

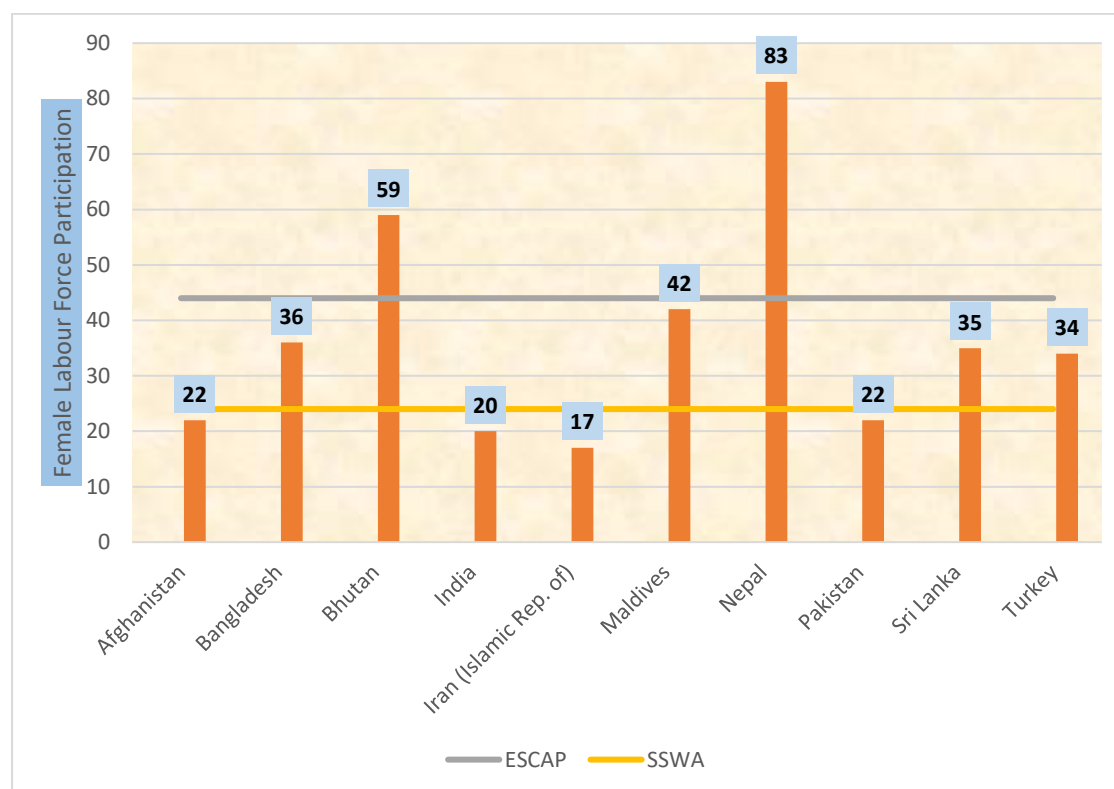
To promote women’s economic empowerment and ensure their continued engagement in the labour force, countries in the sub-region strengthened/enforced workplace laws, introduced gender-responsive labour market policies, improved financial inclusion, and took measures to prevent sexual harassment and sexual violence at work. Countries also took efforts to provide support in fulfilling domestic responsibilities so that time could be freed up to engage in economic activities outside the home. In this regard, countries in South and South West Asia have expanded childcare, maternity leave and paternity leave, and invested in time and labour-saving infrastructures.

Despite the measures adopted by countries to bolster women’s economic empowerment in the sub-region, over the last five years, labour force participation of women has been estimated to have marginally fallen in the sub-region. This follows the trend at the regional and global level, where female labour force participation has slightly decreased over the last five years.³ Currently, the estimates of labour force participation of women (15+ age) in the sub-region range from 17 per cent in Iran to 83 per cent in Nepal (see Figure 1). As evidenced from Figure 2, the labour force participation rates across the sub-region have gender gaps. For the sub-region as a whole, it has been estimated that the male labour force participation is approximately 77 per cent whereas the corresponding figure for females is only 24 per cent. The gender divide is the starkest in Pakistan, while the gap is the shortest in Nepal. Countries need to be cognisant of the extent of gender gaps and continue to devise gender-responsive labour market policies that would make the world of work gender-inclusive.

² ‘Make this the century of women’s equality’. See <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/02/1058271> (accessed 27/10/2020)

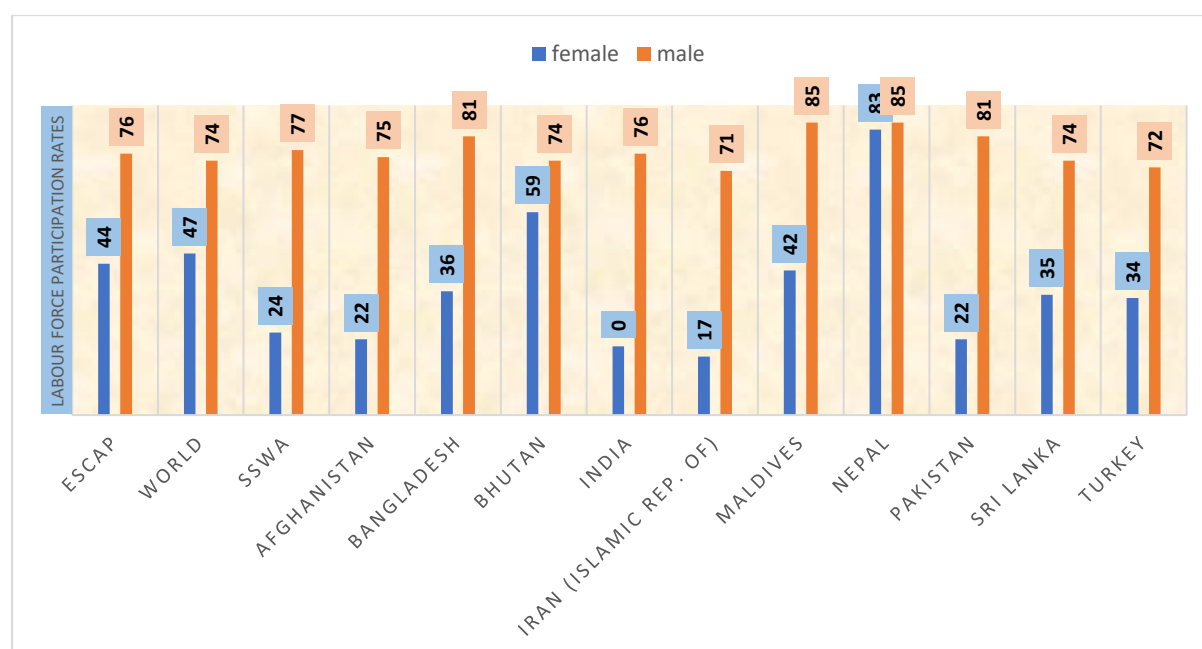
³ Global figures : 47.74 (2015)/46.98 (2020); Regional figures: 45.44 (2015)/43.93 (2020)

Figure 1 Labour force participation rate, South and South-West Asia, 2020



Source: ESCAP Online Database, based on ILO STAT <https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/> (accessed 27/10.2020)

Figure 2 Female Labour Force Participation Rate (15+), South and South-West Asia, ESCAP, World, 2015-2020

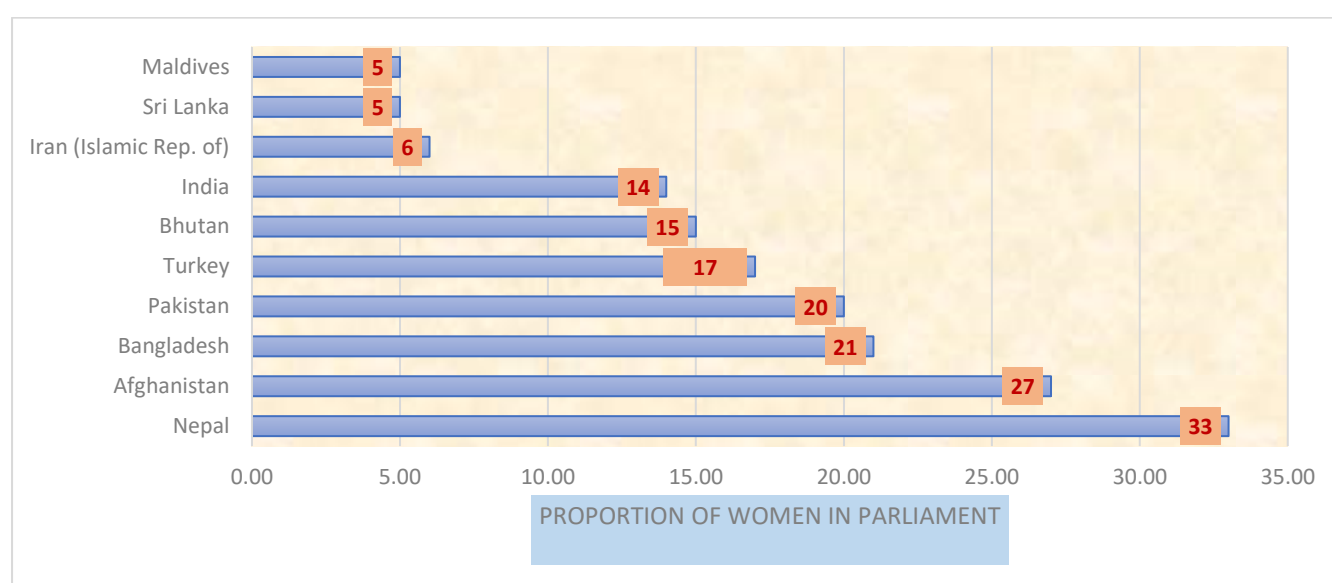


Source: ESCAP Online Database, based on ILO STAT <https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/> (accessed 27/10.2020)

Women's political participation and decision-making

Women's participation in public life and decision-making is critical in advancing the agenda of gender equality. Nepal with 33 per cent women in Parliament has surpassed the internationally agreed upon threshold of 30 per cent representation of women in Parliament. Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan have registered 20 per cent and above of women leaders in their respective parliaments. The average participation of the sub-region at 17 per cent is lower than the regional and global averages of 20 per cent and 25 per cent respectively (see Figure 3). Countries in the region have adopted laws, provided opportunities for capacity-building and mentoring to bolster women's political participation and decision-making. For the coming five years, women's political participation is a key priority area of action for the countries in the region.

Figure 3 Proportion of Women in Parliament, South and South West Asia, 2020



Source: ESCAP Online Database, based on ILO STAT <https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/> (accessed 27/10.2020)

Adoption of laws, regulations, action plans and policies

Countries in the sub-region adopted laws, regulations, action plans, and policies to advance gender equality and empowerment of women and girls. All countries in the sub-region have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Furthermore, several countries have adopted progressive legislations to prevent violence, promote women's economic participation and leadership, and provide land rights.

Challenges:

Women's economic empowerment

Countries in the region noted the difficulties involved in navigating the terrain of work for women's empowerment. Despite the considerable participation of women in the economic sphere, what is disconcerting is that the bulk of employed women in the sub-region is working in the informal sector. Available data suggests that this ranges from 52 per cent in Maldives to 97 per cent in Bangladesh (see Table 2). This would mean that a disproportionately high percentage of working women is devoid of any social protection and is working under precarious conditions.

Countries in the region have adopted many progressive legislations, policies, and programs to support women's economic empowerment, but most of these measures are limited to the formal sector, thereby leaving out a considerable number of working women behind. Going forward, for the next

five years, countries have prioritized women's rights at work and right to work as a key area of action. By developing national level policies to address the needs of women in the informal sector, countries would be able to provide protection and other services for them.

Table 2 Women in Informal Employment in South and South West Asia, by per cent, latest year

Countries	Women in Informal Employment, per cent, latest year
Bangladesh	97 (2017)
India	89 (2018)
Maldives	52 (2016)
Nepal	86.5.2 (2017)
Pakistan	90.6 (2018)
Sri Lanka	71.1 (2016)

Source: ESCAP Online Database see: <https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/> [accessed on 29/10/2020]

Gender norms and stereotypes

All member States in the sub-region identified that the translation of policies, plans, and programs to concrete actions is stifled by adverse gender norms and stereotypes. The presence of gender norms and stereotypes makes it difficult for women to progress at work, to access public offices, makes them vulnerable in emergency situations, especially to violent actions and, as survivors, would be susceptible to secondary victimisation.

As noted by the National Review Report of Bhutan, the lack of awareness surrounding gender issues pervades the general public as well as decision-makers and implementers. This results in poor political will at the level of decision-makers and resistance to implementation at the local level.

Gender norms and stereotypes are all pervasive. Every action taken to promote gender equality should examine the underlying gender norms and stereotypes that create the problem and devise measures to transform these underlying power machinations. It is only when these gender norms and stereotypes are transformed that one can see gender equality on the horizon.

Gender capacities

The limited capacities on gender at the national as well as local level continue to be one of the challenges for effective gender mainstreaming in the sub-region. It also limits the translation of the enabling legal, policy, and political environment into actions. Countries in the sub-region have noted the high attrition rates of officials, including gender focal points in the government and CSOs and how this slows down the process of advancing gender equality. Lack of coordination and cooperation between different government entities and finance and budgetary limitations were also cited as roadblocks to ensure sustained investments in gender equality. To advance the agenda of

“Despite strong constitutional and policy mandates backed by political will and improved awareness levels, understanding of gender issues still appears to be inadequate among decision makers and implementers. This translates into lesser priority to address gender issues at the sectoral level and ownership of gender intervention, thereby limiting the achievement of gender mainstreaming targets. Similarly, the low level of awareness on gender issues among the general public continues to be one of the major challenges in addressing gender issues. The traditional norms and practices related to gender and gender division of roles prevalent in the country pose challenges to gender interventions, particularly at the local level. The belief that women are better caregivers and the strongly gender stereotypical roles impedes efforts to increase women’s participation in decision making” [National review report of Bhutan](#)

gender equality, it is critical to ensure consistent resource flow, both in terms of financial and human resources.

Actions taken to advance gender equality

This section reviews the actions taken by countries in the sub-region during the last five years that advanced gender equality. The actions are reported under six clusters as required for the Beijing+25 Review process.⁴

A. Inclusive development, shared prosperity and decent work

For women's economic empowerment to be a reality, labour market policies need to respond to the lived realities of women's everyday lives. Discriminatory norms and gender stereotypes hinder the fair economic participation of women in the region, be it in terms of equal pay, pay equity, recruitment, retention or promotion. The pervasiveness of violence and harassment at workplaces prevents women from engaging in economic activities. Women often encounter legal and regulatory social barriers that restrict their ability to own assets, enter into contracts, and obtain credit.

To advance gender equality in women's paid work and employment, countries strengthened/enforced workplace laws, introduced gender-responsive labour market policies, improved financial inclusion, and took measures to prevent sexual harassment and sexual violence at work.

In Afghanistan, a number of national gender and legal frameworks have been introduced over the last five years to improve women's economic empowerment. These include the Empowerment Plan for Afghan Women (2018-2021); the National Program on Economic Empowerment of Rural Women (2016); and the Citizen Charter (2016-2025), which includes the establishment of community development councils (CDCs). To ensure safety of women in the workplace, the country has adopted the Law on Prevention of Sexual Harassment (2016). Committees for the prevention of harassment have been established in most government institutions which provide a safe place to register harassment complaints.

The Bhutan Civil Service Rule 2018 prohibits all civil servants from indulging in sexual harassment of any nature. Bhutan has adopted the "Internal Framework to Address Sexual Harassment and Gender Issues at the Workplace" and is currently being implemented by various ministries and agencies. The National Financial Inclusion Strategy (2018-2023) identifies cottage and small industries and the agriculture sector where women are mostly engaged as the priority sectors for financial inclusion in the next five years.

In Bangladesh, the "Domestic Workers Safety and Welfare Policy, 2015" recognized the rights of domestic workers, 90 per cent of whom are women. The policy has important guidelines for determining the wages of domestic workers. In the garment sector, where 80 per cent of the employed are women, the minimum wage has been raised, amounting to a five per cent increment in their salary. The Factory inspection checklist has incorporated specific criteria on gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

In India, *Mahila Shakti Kendras* (Women Empowerment Centres) have been launched as one-stop convergence support service for women for skills development, digital literacy, health and nutrition and employment with student volunteers, ensuring that all schemes can be accessed by rural women. The Indian government is also in the process of creating an online platform for the purpose of registration of complaints related to sexual harassment at workplace and its online monitoring.

⁴ See page 3-4 for more details. For the Guidance Note regarding the Beijing +25 Review, see : <https://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw64-2020/preparations#guidance> [accessed 29/10/2020]

The Constitution of Nepal prohibits discrimination on the ground of sex in wages and social security benefits. It has enacted the new Labor Act 2017 that requires an employer to follow non-discrimination principles. Maternity leave has been increased from 52 to 98 days, with 60 days of leave being fully paid. The country has also made the provision for 15 days fully paid paternity leave. The Government of Nepal enacted The Sexual Harassment at Workplace (Prevention) Act, 2015, to create a safe, secured, and decent work environment. The Labour Act 2017 recognizes domestic workers and includes details about minimum remuneration and holidays, and allows domestic workers to celebrate festivals according to their tradition, religion, and culture. 33% of the seats in civil service and 20% of seats in security agencies like the Nepal Police, Armed Police Force, and Nepal Army have been reserved for women. This has reportedly increased the number of women in these agencies.

By 2020, the National Financial Inclusion Strategy of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan intends to make easy access to financial services available to at least 50 per cent of the adult population and 25 per cent of the adult women. To empower rural women, the Agriculture Development Bank of Pakistan (ADBP) has been supporting women in accessing loans for entrepreneurship in the agriculture sector. The Trade Development Authority of Pakistan (TDAP) creates platforms for rural women entrepreneurs to exhibit their products and trains rural women in packaging and retail of agricultural and organic produce.

In Turkey, based on Law No. 6111, positive discrimination is applied to provide new employment opportunities for women. For employers employing women over 18 years of age, the employers' share of social security contribution is covered by the Unemployment Benefit Fund for 24 to 54 months, provided the fulfilment of certain conditions. In Turkey, under Law No. 5510, domestic workers, the bulk of whom are local or migrant women, are covered under social security, the premiums for which are covered by employers compulsorily if the services are availed for 10 days or more in a month.

“Extending maternity leave to 6 months and paternity leave to 1 month and the flexible working arrangement introduced by CSC for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers are positive trends in terms of policy shifts to increase women LFPR. Nonetheless, unpaid care work at home and lack of child-care options and facilities remains the key challenge to women’s full and robust labour force participation. On average, women spent 6 hours per day in the household work while men spent 3 hours in household. To change the status quo, policies need to be in place to address this unbalance where women’s productive work time is used to contribute to care economy which is not reflected in national accounts and social protection schemes”

National review report of the Maldives

Unpaid work

To truly empower women to participate in the economy, governments need to provide support to fulfil domestic responsibilities. According to available data, women in Bhutan spend 15 per cent of their time in a day doing unpaid domestic chores and care work, but men only spend 5.9 per cent of their time doing the same. In Turkey, the figures are 19.2 per cent and 3.7 per cent.⁵ All over the world, it has been reported that women bear the burden of carrying out the unpaid work in the homestead. As noted by the quote from the National review report of Maldives, unpaid care work and a lack of childcare facilities are the key challenges to advancing women’s economic empowerment. If women’s empowerment shall be a reality, then it is pertinent for countries to provide institutional support to fulfil care responsibilities which can free up time that can be used by women elsewhere. To support unpaid care and domestic work demands and to promote professional life and family life conciliation,

⁵ ESCAP online database see: <https://dataexplorer.unescap.org> [accessed on 1/11/2020]. From the sub-region, data is available only for Bhutan and Turkey. Both figures are for the year 2015.

countries in the sub-region expanded childcare, maternity and paternity leave, and invested in time and labour-saving infrastructures.

The Government of Afghanistan has prioritized investment in time-saving infrastructure, transportation services, and water and sanitation which will particularly improve the circumstances and reduce time poverty for rural women.

In Bhutan, childcare centres have been established based on a needs assessment conducted in all the government offices, including local government and the informal sectors. Several rounds of training for caregivers, including those from the CSOs and the private sector, were conducted by the National Commission on Women and Children (NCWC) in collaboration with relevant agencies in 2018 and 2019. In 2016, the Royal Civil Service Commission increased paid maternity leave from three to six months. Flexitime is also implemented for additional six months to facilitate breastfeeding and proper care for children. Similarly, paternity leave has been increased from five to ten working days. In 2019, for the first time, the government carried out a study on the valuation on unpaid care and domestic work. The findings of the study are expected to impact policy decisions on reducing the burden of unpaid care work on women and encouraging their participation in paid and productive work. In Nepal, it has been reported that the Central Bureau of Statistics is planning to conduct a 'time-use survey'.

In Bangladesh, in compliance with the Labour Law, childcare facilities are being expanded in garment and other industries where a considerable number of women are working. The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA) is drafting a "Child Day Care Centre Act" which will provide guidelines for day care and their services.

In Iran, the economic empowerment plan for female heads of household living in marginalized areas and informal settlements has been implemented. This involves strengthening the micro-business development and forming local partnership groups to promote and empower female heads of household living in informal neighborhoods and settlements. The access of rural and nomadic women to credit is augmented through the Rural and Nomadic Women's Micro-Credit Fund. It offers easy access to low interest credit for agriculture and productive activities.

The Government of India has recently amended the Maternity Benefit Act to extend the period of mandatory paid maternity leave for working women from 12 weeks to 26 weeks. To reduce the drudgery associated with collecting firewood and for securing the health of homemakers in rural areas, India aims to deliver 80 million free gas cylinder connections, of which more than 70 million gas connections have already been provided.

The Government of the Maldives extended maternity leave to 6 months and introduced one-month paternity leave to all the government institutions and state-owned institutions (SOEs). At the same time, the civil service and SOE's have introduced flexible working hours for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers.

In Pakistan, the Day Care Centres Bill 2019 has been approved by the sub-committee of the National Assembly Standing Committee on Human Rights to make it mandatory for every public or private sector office with 25 or more staffers to establish a day care.

In Turkey, the Labour Act No. 4857 amendment of 2016 prescribes paid maternity leave of 16 weeks to women giving birth as well as one of the spouses or adoptive parents in the case of adoption. A regulation passed in 2016 allows parents to work half-time. Following the amendment to the Labour Act in 2015, employees are entitled to five days of paternity leave.

B. Poverty eradication, social protection and social services

Poverty is multi-dimensional in nature and its impacts are likely to be worse for women vis-à-vis men and this exacerbates gender inequality. Globally, between age 20 and 34 years, women are more likely to be living in poor households than men.⁶ Households with children are among the poorest, while single parents with children, and predominantly single mothers with children, face a higher risk of poverty.⁷ Living in poverty can result in nutritional deficiencies and poorer educational outcomes. Shocks in the form of job loss or health problems could put families in poverty. Unfortunately, data on female poverty is scarce. To alleviate poverty among women and girls, countries in the South and South West Asian sub-region have been mainly supporting women's entrepreneurship, adopting social protection policies and supporting decent work for women.

Table 3 Proportion of population living below the national poverty line, South and South West Asia, 2015-2018

	2015	2016	2017	2018
Afghanistan		55		
Bangladesh		24		
Bhutan			8	
Maldives		8		
Pakistan	24	8.6	7.9	9.9
Sri Lanka		4		
Turkey	14	14	14	

Source: ESCAP Online Database see: <https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/> [accessed on 1/11/2020]

Women's entrepreneurship

Trends across the sub-region show that entrepreneurship is a key pathway for millions of women to engage in the economy, improve their livelihoods and those of their families, and gain a measure of financial independence. However, gender disparities persist in areas ranging from access to finance, to opportunities, to acquire essential business skills. Women's engagement in entrepreneurship across the sub-region tends to be concentrated in low value-added sectors such as wholesale and retail trade and agriculture, with home-based entrepreneurship being an important factor in some countries, linked to women's disproportionate responsibilities for unpaid home care.

In Afghanistan, a range of government and international partner programs have reached hundreds of thousands of Afghan women. Such programs have been supported by an intensive program of skills development initiatives nationwide. At the time of Beijing+25 reporting, some 102,000 women and 28,000 men have benefited in areas such as tailoring, carpentry, gardening, carpeting, embroidery, candle and flower making and handicrafts. According to a study on Women in Agriculture in Afghanistan in 2017, women's associations have also begun to emerge as an important factor in economic empowerment. For instance, a network of 36 village women food processing centers employs a total of 700 workers in the west of the Herat province, and a Women Saffron Growers Association has been established to support women in this sector. However, one constraint (among others) that women find in all fields is a lack of access to collateral to start a small business, as family assets are usually under a male name.

In Bhutan, the Department of Cottage and Small Industries (DCSI) conducted skills development, training and business advocacy workshops, particularly for women in the areas of upholstery, bamboo

⁶ World Bank, "Gender Differences in Poverty and Household composition through the life-cycle", Policy Research Working Paper, No. 8360 (Washington D.C., World Bank, 2018).

⁷ World Bank, "Gender Differences in Poverty and Household composition through the life-cycle", Policy Research Working Paper, No. 8360 (Washington D.C., World Bank, 2018).

and cane furniture making, apparel designing and tailoring, basic spa therapy, baking, hairdressing, small business management, and natural dyes.

The Bangladesh Bank has fixed the interest rate for financing women entrepreneurs at 9%. The National Industry Policy 2016 categorised and redefined the type of industries to facilitate women's access to institutional finance. A country-wide women-friendly marketing network is being developed. The Department of Agriculture Marketing (DAM) has helped moulding a number of women-agri-business entrepreneurs. DAM constructed women market sections in 60 growers' markets and 15 wholesale markets. Above 3,000 women groups formed by various projects of DAM have been trained on agri-marketing. A project of the Ministry of Commerce, "E-BanijjoKorbo, NijerBabosaGorbo", provides training for creating entrepreneurship for more than 5,000 women across the country on e-commerce.

In India, the Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) provides micro-credit facilities to women and capacity building of women beneficiaries. For the economic advancement of women, the "Mahila e-Haat" Portal has been launched by the Government, which is an online digital marketing platform to support women entrepreneurs, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and NGOs.

Iran is currently implementing the National Empowerment Plan for women seeking business opportunities in 31 provinces of the country which has resulted in the provision of a database of women entrepreneurs from different provinces.

In Nepal, efforts are underway to promote entrepreneurship among rural women through skills and entrepreneurship training, loans for rural women, establishment of a rural development bank, institutionalization of poverty alleviation funds, and through the Micro Enterprise Development Program, which caters to the needs of a large number of women from Dalit and indigenous communities.

In Pakistan, the Punjab CSW Women Innovation Network WIN2018 was established to facilitate and support women entrepreneurs and start-ups and model best practices so that other public and private sector entities are encouraged to support and initiate similar incubators.

In Turkey, the Programme for Strengthening Women Entrepreneurship in Agriculture aims to promote, support, and increase women entrepreneurship in rural areas, and to improve investment opportunities and implement feasible women farmers' projects. In 2018, it has been reported that 4211 women farmers received entrepreneurship training and that the training has led to the development of business projects related to agriculture and animal husbandry.

Social protection

Social protection policies and measures are a key element in the strategies of all countries in the sub-region to address female poverty, with a variety of approaches and levels of social protection development evident across the sub-region.

Afghanistan's 2018 Social Protection Law provides shelter and income for elderly women to alleviate the care burden on families. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs aims to establish a dedicated agency for cash transfers for pensions and other social protection services.

Bangladesh's National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) was approved in 2015 and since then, the number of beneficiaries has been reported to be on the rise. The NSSS has used a life cycle approach and advocates for income transfer under a reformed program consolidating the existing fragmented social protection programs. A Gender Policy for the NSSS has been approved and a Gender Strategy and Action Plan for the implementation of the Policy has been developed, identifying action for each ministry implementing social protection programs, and is in the process of approval.

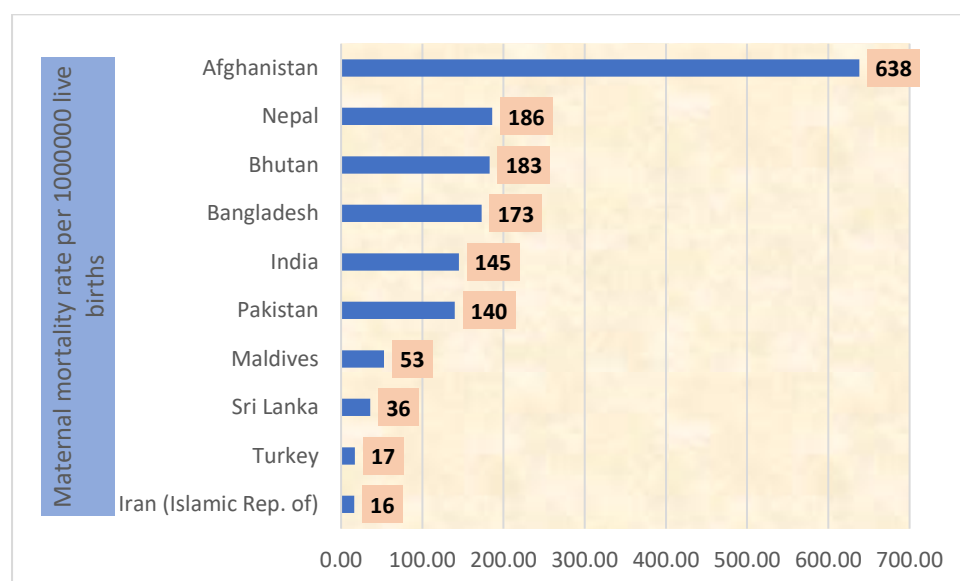
In Nepal, the Social Security Act, 2018 has provisioned social security for eight different population groups, namely, senior citizens, economically deprived communities, incapacitated people, single women, people with disabilities, children, and those not capable of taking care on their own. The government provides premium for medical insurance of Rs. 100,000/- to senior citizens above 70 years of age through the National Health Insurance Programme. This will reduce the financial burden of women. The Contribution Based Social Security Act 2017 of Nepal is applicable to all employees in formal and informal sectors and self-employed employees.

Iran provides social insurance to all housewives. In Turkey, under Law No. 5510, domestic workers, the bulk of whom are local or migrant women, are covered under social security, the premiums for which are covered by employers compulsorily if the services are availed for 10 days or more in a month. In Pakistan, the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) of Pakistan is a social safety net with targets aligned to meet the SDGs.

Health

Unequal access to healthcare undermines inclusive development. Furthermore, health shocks can drive families into poverty. To promote inclusive development, prevent households from falling into poverty, and improve the health outcomes of women and girls, countries in the sub-region have expanded health services and provided access to health services through universal health coverage or public health services, conducting awareness/health promotion campaigns, especially at schools where comprehensive sexuality education has been incorporated into curricula.

Figure 4 Maternal Mortality Rates, per 100,000 live births, South and South West Asia, 2017



Source: ESCAP Online Database, based on UNFPA. See: <https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/> (accessed on 1/11/2020)

Afghanistan's National Health Policy 2015-2020 prioritizes five policy areas: governance, institutional development, public health, health services, and human resources. It is complemented by the National Health Strategy 2016-2020 which aims to provide equitable and accessible healthcare services to women, the National Gender and Human Rights Strategy for the health sector, and a recently finalized Reproductive, Maternal, New-born, and Child and Adolescent Strategy. The country is working towards promoting public-private partnerships in this sphere while engaging with religious leaders, youth, and civil society in order to reach their goal of achieving a Contraceptive Prevalence Rate (CPR)

of 30 per cent by reducing the unmet needs to 10 per cent by 2020. Expanding access to essential reproductive, maternal, and child health services by rural women is a key focus of Afghanistan's health services.

The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan mandates the state to provide universal health coverage. Over the last five years, the country constructed the 150-bedded Gyaltsuen Jetsun Pema Mother and Child Hospital to accelerate maternal and child health; developed the Strategic Plan for Cervical Cancer Program (2019-2023), developed and implemented the Suicide Prevention Action Plan (2015-2018) and established Adolescent Friendly Health Services (AFHS) units. The Bhutan National Strategic Plan for the Prevention and Control of STIs and HIV/AIDS (2012-2016) provides for the inclusion of women in the decision-making processes related to design, implementation and review of HIV/AIDS control programs. Mental health facilitation training was made mandatory for all the counsellors certified by the Bhutan Board of Certified Counsellors (BBCC). The capacity of young people was enhanced through Youth Peer Education Network (Y-PEER) programs to advocate for sexual and reproductive health and rights issues, including the prevention of GBV in higher learning institutions in the country.

Bangladesh has established community clinics at the ward level. In 2015, a multipurpose Health Call Center was launched to provide health advice round-the-clock. Due to the shortage of skilled healthcare personnel in remote areas, the government has started telemedicine services. Protocol has been developed on the Health Sector Response to Gender-based Violence for Health Care Providers with UNFPA. This has led to capacity building of 1,334 health service providers including doctors, nurses, and midwives.

The Government of India formulated the National Health Policy 2017, to attain the goal of highest possible level of health and well-being for all at all ages and universal access to good quality health care services. The Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) of India promotes appropriate practice, care, and institutional service utilization during pregnancy, delivery; and lactation by providing cash incentives in Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) mode to pregnant and lactating mothers. The 2016 Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of India prohibits gender-based cruel treatments for disabled women, including sterilization and termination of pregnancies.

In the Maldives, the National Mental Health Policy for 2015-2025 was formulated and published, following which, the first mental health centre was established to address the limitations of accessing help due to prohibitive costs.

The Government of Nepal has rolled out the Public Health Insurance Plan in 42 out of 77 districts and aspires to go for universal coverage. The Safe Motherhood and Reproductive Health Right Act 2018 legalizes abortion and provides for free abortion service at all public health facilities. It makes abortion legal for all cases up to 12 weeks of gestation and up to 28 weeks gestation in cases of rape or incest. Abortion is lawful at any time if the pregnancy poses a danger to the woman's life, or physical or mental health, or in case of foetal abnormality.

Pakistan adopted the National Health Vision [2016-2025] which provides a road map to improve the health of all Pakistanis, particularly women and children. Free medical care and medicines for all diseases are provided to all patients including women in all government hospitals. Moreover, facilities of family planning advice and services, mother and child health care (MCH), medical care for general ailment; midwifery services and social education are provided to women without discrimination. Lady Health Workers, Community Midwife Cadre, Family Health Worker, and Community Health Volunteers provide health services at doorstep. In hospitals, female wards have been established and female staff has been appointed to take care of female patients.

In Turkey, under the Monitoring Programme for the Women in the Age Group 15-49, all women in the age group 15-49 are monitored minimum twice by primary healthcare institutions in order to collect information about reproduction behaviour; to identify risky situations; to identify pregnancy at early

period; to get information about reproductive health method; to provide counselling about women's health and reproductive health methods and to deliver on-the-spot training. The country conducts pre-marriage counselling programs that make the participants aware about sexual and reproductive health.

Countries in the sub-region are both sources of refugees (e.g. Afghanistan) and host countries for refugees (e.g. Iran, Pakistan, Turkey). Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees in the world: an estimated one in every 23 people in Turkey is a refugee. Countries in the region have adopted measures to support its refugee population. In Turkey, the "Improving the Health Status of the Syrian Population under Temporary Protection and Related Services Provided by Turkish Authorities (SIHHAT) Project", launched in 2016, aims to improve the primary and secondary health care services to Syrians. It has been planned to open 178 Migrant Health Centers, 790 migrant health units, 26 mobile health units, and 5 cancer screening units in a total of 28 provinces which are densely populated by Syrians. Through the Universal Public Health Insurance (UPHI) scheme, refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran can benefit from a health insurance package for hospitalization, similar to that of nationals. Furthermore, in accordance with the Code of Conduct on the education of foreigners admitted in 2016, free education is provided to immigrant children.

Box 1 India adopts the Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2016

The Government of India adopted the Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2016, which implores government and local authorities to take measures to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy their rights equally with others. With respect to women with disabilities, the Act provides for the following:

- Ensures the reproductive rights of women with disabilities and prohibits medical procedures including termination of pregnancy of women with disabilities without informed and expressed consent.
- Mandates the government to take measures to provide pre-natal and peri-natal care of mother and child.
- Prohibits discrimination on the ground of disability.
- Equal opportunity is being provided for women with disabilities to represent in the Central Advisory Board, the highest policy recommending body in the disability sector.
- Mandates 4% reservation in government jobs and 5% reservation in seats in government and government aided higher educational institutions for persons with benchmark disabilities which are equally applicable to women with disabilities.

[Source: National review report of India](#)

Education

Countries noted the need to be prepared for the changing world of work in the future and considered education to play a key role in ensuring that the workforce is adequately prepared to meet the demands of the labour market. In order to improve the educational outcomes of women and girls, governments in the sub-region took efforts to ensure girls' access, retention, and completion of education, TVET and skills development, strengthened educational curricula to increase gender-responsiveness and eliminate bias and promoted safe, harassment-free, and inclusive educational environments.

Improving gender balance within technical and vocational educational training is a key priority for Afghanistan. The national TVET strategy (2013-18) enshrined gender equity as a main principle in providing "equitable educational opportunities and service delivery to women and girls". Female literacy is another key focus in Afghanistan, with the Ministry of Education planning to increase the number of female literate students from 53 per cent in 2015 to 60 per cent in 2021. Gender bias in education has also been a focus, with revision of textbooks to ensure gender balance in text and images.

In Bhutan, a particular focus was given to strengthening the school environment to increase and sustain girl's participation, especially at the tertiary level. Gender-friendly school infrastructure and facilities were made accessible and efforts were made to improve menstrual hygiene. Gender-responsive teaching and classroom initiatives were adopted and the curriculum was reviewed from a gender equality perspective.

In Bangladesh, a National Strategy to promote Gender Equality in TVET was formulated. It aims to increase female participation in formal TVET institutions by at least 60 per cent by 2020 as well as to increase female employment by 30 per cent. Through a circular by the Technical Education Board, the quota for female enrolment has been increased from 10 per cent to 20 per cent.

Iran is keen on reducing drop-out rates of girls from education. For this, the country is working on increasing the educational coverage of girls who have dropped out of school in deprived areas. The country provides free education for immigrant children and has extended the right to education for illegal and illegitimate asylum seekers.

In the Maldives, while student enrolment figures are excellent, the national review report notes the emerging issue of school non-attendance. The school non-attendance is linked to a societal shift to under-value education, as family instability leads boys towards crime and deviancy, and family violence and abuse make girls feel less secure and disengaged from studies. This has been noted as a serious setback in a country where education has previously been valued and prioritised by parents.

In Nepal, over the last five years, several legislations and policies have been passed to make education more inclusive. These are: Inclusive Education Policy for Disabled Children, 2016; Higher Education Policy, 2017; Pro-poor targeted Scholarship Procedures, 2017; Comprehensive School Safety Implementation Procedures, 2018; and the Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2018. The latter makes the State responsible to ensure that no child is deprived of education and makes education free up to secondary level.

In Pakistan, the federal and provincial governments are reviewing existing curricula to address negative stereotyping of women and to ensure that negative assumptions do not limit women's and girls' choices and opportunities. A communication strategy is being put in place to ensure negative societal attitudes towards girls and women in education are addressed. Further, the Girls Community Schools (GCSs) program serves out-of-school children whose families are not able or willing to send their daughters to unfamiliar, distant government schools. These schools are located within the community and teachers are respected members of the local community who follow the primary school curriculum.

In Turkey, the Conditional Educational Assistance Program has been extended to Syrians and other refugee children. The country has expanded Support Units against sexual assault and harassment in universities.

C. Prevention of violence, stigma and stereotype

Freedom from violence, stigma, and stereotypes is fundamental to achieving gender equality. In the last five years, countries in the sub-region prioritised action against intimate partner violence/domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and child, early, and forced marriages. The proportion of women in the sub-region who experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime ranges from 54 per cent in Bangladesh to 15 per cent in Bhutan. The proportion of women who faced sexual violence from a non-partner in their lifetime ranges from 19 per cent in India to 3 per cent in Bangladesh (see table 3). To address violence against women and girls, countries resorted to introducing or strengthening laws and their implementation, provided services and improved access to justice for survivors, and introduced/strengthened preventive strategies to combat GBV.

Table 4 Proportion of women disclosing experience of partner and non-partner violence, South and South West Asia, as of July 2020

	<i>Intimate Partner Violence among ever-partnered women (%)</i>		<i>Non-partner violence since age 15 among all women (%)</i>			
	Physical and/or sexual violence		Physical violence by non-partner		Sexual violence by non-partner	
	Lifetime	Last 12 Months	Lifetime	Last 12 months	Lifetime	Last 12 Months
Afghanistan (2015)	51	46	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Bangladesh (2015)	54	27	28	6	3	3
Bhutan (2017)	15	6	13	3	6	2
India (2015)	18	5	9	2	19	5
Iran	...					
Maldives (2016)	16	6	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	Na
Nepal (2016)	25	11	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Pakistan (2017)	25	15	n.a.	n.a.	13.9	10
Sri Lanka (2012)	28	18	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.

Source: kNOwVAWdata from UNFCA see: https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/knowvawdata_regional_vaw_map_july_29_2020_final.pdf

n.a.= data not collected/not available in source report ...= no known survey conducted or no results available yet

Afghanistan adopted the Child Protection Law 2019 and the Anti-Harassment Law to protect Women and Children 2017. All 34 provinces of Afghanistan have EVAW Prosecution Units headed by female prosecutors, and EVAW Courts have been established across the country. A national High Commission (with 12 representatives of different organizations) and provincial commissions on EVAW have also been set up in all provinces, along with a deputy position in the Attorney General's Office, 32 provincial EVAW attorney offices, 28 EVAW special courts, Family Response Units in all police offices, and 27 women protection centres in 20 provinces.

Box 2 Afghanistan: Despite progress, many challenges remain to eliminate VAWG

Despite the above measures and many awareness raising programs on the rights of women within the Constitution and Islam, many challenges stand in the way of eliminating gender-based violence in Afghanistan. These include low rates of literacy and awareness of women rights; security challenges and attacks on women in public spaces; lack of the rule of law in remote areas; and the prevalence of discriminatory social norms that bar women from seeking legal assistance. As a result, few cases get to be reported compared to the actual prevalence rate of violence against women due to stigma, discrimination, fear of reprisals, as well as the treatment of victims of sexual abuse as perpetrators of zina (i.e. sexual intercourse outside of marriage) or "attempted zina". Therefore, women and girls are sometimes charged with the "intention" of committing zina when they run away from abuse and seek help.

Source: [National review report of Afghanistan](#)

In Bhutan, Standard Operating Procedures (SoP) have been developed to ensure minimum standards in the provision of services to women and children and enhance coordination among the various agencies. The last five years also saw the expansion of the Women and Child Protection Unit/Desks (WCPU/D) of the Royal Bhutan Police (RBP), and the establishment of the Family and Child Bench at the Thimphu district court and One-Stop Crisis Centers. In 2017, the National Commission on Women

and Children conducted a comprehensive national level survey on VAWG by interviewing over 2,000 women and girls aged 15-64 years.

In Bangladesh, more than 8,000 adolescent clubs exist which build awareness for prevention of violence against women and children and child marriage. The country conducts gender training in the Police Staff College. The country conducted its second Violence Against Women (VAW) Survey in 2015 which found that women survivors are shy to report incidence of violence.

Iran has adopted a law against acid attack. A comprehensive bill on Protection of Women Against Violence is also under final adoption in the Cabinet. In India, the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 2018 provides for stringent penal provisions for the offences of rape, including death penalty for rape of a girl below the age of 12 years, and swift administration of justice. The Act mandates completion of investigation and trials within 2 months each. Appeals against convictions or acquittal are to be disposed of within 6 months. For ensuring the safety and security of women in the public transport system, cab safety measures have also been put in place.

In the Maldives, the Family Law was amended to ensure equal distribution of matrimonial property. Stakeholders of the national Beijing+25 review process identified conservative religious views as one of the biggest barriers and setbacks to address VAWG in a context where religious patriarchal views sit uncomfortably with calls for gender equality and women's empowerment. In the last five years, the sentencing of women to death by stoning for alleged adultery in two instances by island magistrates court was a big setback for gender equality in the country. In both instances, it has been reported that the Supreme Court intervened and annulled the sentences. The country's national review report noted that "the situation requires intensive professional development and capacity building initiatives and programs for judges, to improve service delivery and attitudinal changes among duty bearers and law enforcement officials to align with human rights principles and laws."

In Nepal, the Federal Parliament enacted the Victims of Crimes Protection Act, 2018 to ensure the right to justice for the victims of crime throughout the process of criminal investigation, adjudication of cases, compensation, and social rehabilitation. The government abolished the bonded labor system and rehabilitated ex-Kamaiyas. The government also eliminated bonded girls working as Kamlaris and they are receiving education in residential schools with scholarships. The government is also set to abolish the practice of Chhaupadi (women's seclusion during menstruation).

In Pakistan, the Gender Crime Centre has been established at the federal level for the collection of statistical data on GBV and to devise policies accordingly. Women Protection Centers have been established all over the country to address the grievances women victim of violence along with Women Police Stations. A 24-hour Helpline (1099) has been established to provide free legal advice, redressal, and referral mechanism. Model Ladies Complaint Units (LCUs) and Women Police Stations and Women Complaint Centre have been set up throughout the country as well.

Box 3 Gender responsive policing project mainstreams gender in the National Police Bureau, Pakistan

Pakistan's Gender Responsive Policing Project enables the National Police Bureau to support the Executive Police to adopt and implement a standardized policy for gender mainstreaming and to develop monitoring and evaluation tools to ensure the rule of law. Activities under the project include gender audit of police organizations, gender review of police curriculum, formulating a gender strategy for the police, and guidelines for equality of opportunity and inclusive participation of women in the police.

Source: [National review report of Pakistan](#)

In Turkey, Law No. 6284 on the Protection of Family and Prevention of Violence against Women extends legal protection to those who have been subject to stalking. In 2018, Turkey launched the Women's Support System (KADES), a smart phone application that can be used by women to reach law enforcement agencies in the event of any violent episodes. The "Ask for Help" button helps law enforcement agencies to provide effective and fast intervention 24/7. Under the "Contribution of Religious Officials to Protection of Family and Prevention of Violence Against Women" project, in-service trainings have been organized for the staff of the Presidency of Religious affairs with the aim of raising awareness on GBV and underlining the role that religion can play in preventing violence. Consequently, it is aimed that the religious officials (vaiz, imam, muezzin, and instructors of Quran course) would reach out to the general public about the same.

Media and VAWG

The media's representation of women is an important avenue for sending empowering messages about women and girls. On the other hand, it can also be a vehicle that reinforces negative stereotypes about gender. In the Beijing Platform for Action, women's increased participation in the media is considered an important means to combat negative social norms. In the last five years, countries addressed the portrayal of women and girls in the media by supporting the media industry to develop codes of conduct, providing training to media professionals, and promoting participation and leadership of women in the media. Today, the media not only spans print and electronic medium, but also includes the digital space which has become another avenue through which women face violence.

Under Afghanistan's national action plan for women, media houses are provided with training support to enhance women's role in management and leadership positions. Recent election periods have seen an increased number of women actively participating in media election campaigns. In the Maldives, the Anti-Defamation Act of 2016 was repealed in 2018, thereby releasing previous limitations that stifled the freedom of the press. Stakeholder discussions provided insights about the male-dominated nature of the editorial rooms in the country's media landscape, which is reflected in the membership of the media self-regulatory body, the Maldives Media Council (MMC). While increasing numbers of trained women journalists and significant improvements in women's participation in all areas of the media have been witnessed, stakeholders at the national Beijing+25 review process highlighted the superficial inclusion of women as news anchors and presenters in the broadcast media, which does affect the substantive participation and contribution of women in the sector. Going forward, stakeholders proposed to strengthen the implementation of existing laws to achieve gender equality and to formulate media guidelines on gender-sensitive reporting, which is required to improve the quality of reporting on issues affecting gender equality and women's empowerment. Turkey has created Principles of Ethical Broadcasting which were created stemming from research by the Radio and Television Supreme Council and the Association of Television Broadcast. In 2016, the National Assembly of Pakistan passed the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), under which the offences of cyber harassment, online stalking, and non-consensual sharing of intimate images have been recognized as offences. In India, a central cybercrime reporting portal (www.cybercrime.gov.in) has also been launched in 2018, which allows citizens to report online content pertaining to child pornography/child sexual abuse material or sexually explicit content and rape/gang rape content.

Trafficking

Human trafficking is another sphere within which violence against women and girls is pervasive and which requires systematic action at both national and international levels and cross-border collaboration. All countries have put in place legislation, action plans, and capacity-building measures to address human trafficking in the region and protect and assist victims in line with international treaties and standards.

Afghanistan has established an intra-ministry High Commission to Fight against Abduction and Human Trafficking. The Commission includes the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, the

Independent Bar Association and two representatives from social organizations to protect and assist victims of human trafficking.

In Bangladesh, rules were developed in 2017 to implement the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act 2012. Monitoring Cells have been established in the Police Headquarters and districts to oversee the trafficking situation and Victim Support Centres have been instituted.

The Government of India is working towards the rehabilitation of victims of trafficking and to keep watch on fraudulent placement agencies in states which dupe unscrupulous victims in the garb of providing employment. Financial assistance is provided to State Governments to hold Judicial Colloquiums on Human Trafficking which aims at sensitizing the judicial officers to focus on procedures for speedy disposal of trafficking cases and taking stringent action against traffickers and exercise discretion as provided under the law. The Government is also considering bringing out a new legislation to comprehensively address various aspect of human trafficking, including the prevention of trafficking and the protection and rehabilitation of victims.

The Maldivian government formulated the National Anti-Trafficking Action Plan 2015-2019 and adopted an on-line case management system and gave prominence to the Anti-Trafficking Department under the authority of the police in order to increase the resources and expertise to roll out the Anti-Human Trafficking Act 2013.

In Nepal, a fund for the rehabilitation of survivors of trafficking has been established in each district, and rehabilitation homes/centres have been established in eight districts for the survivors/victims. Investigation procedures for human trafficking have been incorporated in the training curricula of the Nepal Police. Police personnel, prosecutors, and judges have been receiving regular training to receive updates on investigation procedures of human trafficking cases. National Minimum Standards for Victim Protection and the SOPs for Shelter Homes for trafficking survivors are being implemented to ensure adequate protection, assistance, and provision of safe homes.

In 2016, Turkey adopted the Regulation on Combating Human Trafficking and the Protection of Victims. The Directorate General for Migration Management coordinated several training programs by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Migration Policy Development Centre (ICMPD), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to raise awareness on human trafficking.

Child, early and forced marriages

In South and South West Asia, child marriage remains widespread, with nearly thirty per cent (28.7 per cent) of women aged 20 to 24 years who were married or in a union before age 18 and 7.4 per cent by age 15.⁸ Countries across the region are taking necessary measures to reduce the prevalence of child, early, and forced marriage. These efforts include changing the legal age of marriage, encouraging girls to stay in school, awareness building measures, adopting new laws and national action plans to support its implementation, co-opting religious leaders to spread awareness, etc.

According to Girls not Brides, 35 per cent of girls in Afghanistan are married before or by the age of 18, with girls who are not in school three times more likely to be in this situation. Young women are often married to older men who are able to pay dowry or support the bride's family financially. While currently the legal marriage age is set by law at 16 for females and 18 for males, a new draft family law would standardize the marriage age at 18 to take account of the country's constitution and international human rights.

⁸ ESCAP SDG Data Explorer, SDG 5.3.1, Women aged 20 to 24 years who were first or in a union married before age 15 and 18 (%), 2019. See: <https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/> [Accessed 5/11/2020].

In Bhutan, several awareness and sensitisation programs on the negative impact of child marriage, forced marriage, and teenage pregnancies were carried out in urban and rural areas. The general public has been made aware of the laws prohibiting child marriage and the penalties involved.

The Government of Bangladesh has pledged for reducing marriage of girls under 15 to zero by 2021. The country adopted the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017, Child Marriage Restraint Rules 2018, and the National Plan of Action to End Child Marriage (2018-30). The Government has made it mandatory to present a birth certificate at the time of marriage.

In Iran, the prevalence of child marriages is highest in border regions. The country is considering a draft proposal on increasing the minimum age of marriage, increasing family awareness through engagement of religious leaders, and involving NGOs for public awareness raising and informing the relevant authorities to react in the cases of child marriage.

The Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child) Scheme of the Government of India aims to prevent gender-based sex selective elimination, to ensure the survival and protection of the girl child, and to ensure her education, with an overall aim of increasing the child sex ratio.

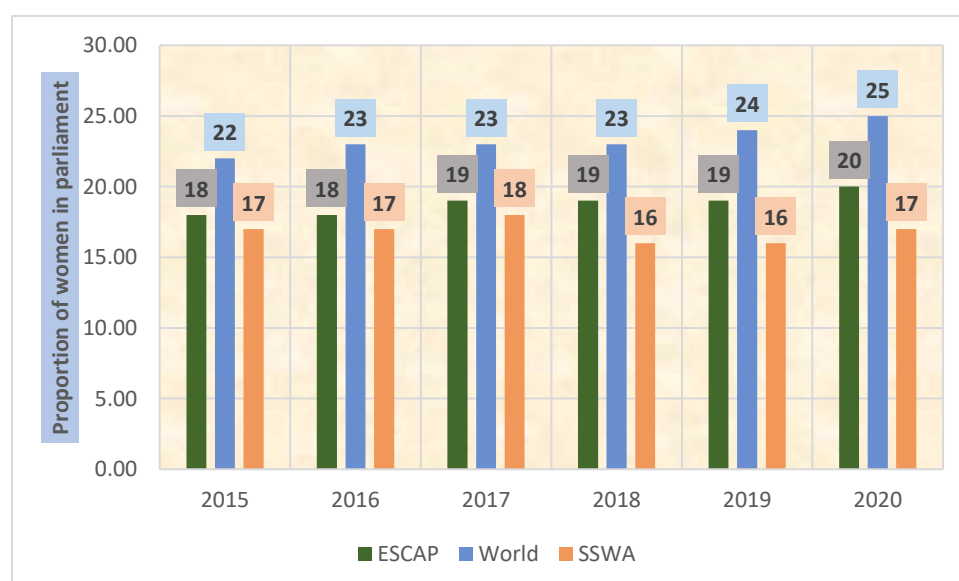
Nepal's National Strategy for Ending Child Marriage, 2016 aims to end child marriage by 2030. Child marriage is illegal and invalid in Nepal. The country has also criminalized sex selective abortion and forced abortion making both punishable by imprisonment and fine.

Turkey has devised the "Action Plan on Combating Early and Forced Marriages (2019-2023)" to fight early and forced marriage and to develop and implement policies in cooperation with all parties.

D. Accountability, participation and gender-responsive institutions

Women's participation in public life and decision-making is critical in advancing the agenda of gender equality. For the sub-region as a whole, the average political participation of women has not changed much over the last five years. At 17 per cent, it lags behind the regional and global figures of 20 and 25 per cent respectively. In South and South West Asia, countries implemented capacity building programs, and provided opportunities for networking and mentoring and adopted laws and regulations to bolster women's political participation and leadership.

Figure 5 Proportion of Women in Parliament, ESCAP and SSWA, 2015-2020



Source: ESCAP Online Database, based on IPU. see: <https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/> [accessed on 02/11/2020]

In line with the national constitution and various laws and frameworks, the Afghanistan Government has provided specific quotas for women's inclusion in politics and decision-making positions at national and local levels (27 per cent at national level and at least 20 per cent at provincial level). The national quota is based on at least two women being elected to the National Council from each province. A 25 per cent quota for women is further stipulated for district councils and at least 25 per cent of chairs in each council of the district should be assigned to women candidates.

To increase the number of women in the civil service, recruitment procedures apply an affirmative action approach by granting five additional points to women during the examinations and ensuring that there is at least one woman in the Government Employment Committee. A policy has furthermore been approved by the Government of Afghanistan to increase the percentage of female civil servants by two per cent annually. The 2019 Election Law provides for increased gender equality in the appointment of members of the Election Commission, Complaints Commission and Heads of the Committees.

Box 4 Progress in women's representation in Afghanistan's court system

Increasing the number of women at all levels of the judicial system is a vital part of the broader gender equality agenda of any society. In line with its National Action Plan for Women, the Afghanistan Government has undertaken specific steps to appoint women as members of the High Council of the Supreme Court. These steps include training courses for female judges, establishing the Female Judges Association and attracting women to the judicial stage (practice) period. Between 2008 and 2016, the representation of women in the judiciary increased from 4.7 per cent to 11 per cent. Supreme Court sub-units such as the Juvenile Court, Family Court, and ERAW Court are managed by women, and women are appointed as judicial councilors and work as members of various tribunals of the Supreme Court.

Source: [National review report of Afghanistan](#)

In Bhutan, a National Plan of Action to Promote Gender Equality in Elected Offices (NPAPGEEEO) was developed to increase women's participation in politics. Consequently, numerous initiatives, ranging from awareness raising on the importance of women's political participation to capacity building and preparing women to take part in elections, were carried out by the relevant government agencies and CSOs. To promote women's participation, Bhutan introduced Mobile Polling Booths in the 2018 elections to increase accessibility to voting. Furthermore, Bhutan's Gender Equality Strategy (2018-2023) aims to increase the number of women in executive positions to 15 per cent by 2023. The Corporate Governance Rules and Regulations 2018 provides for equal representation of men and women in the Board of Directors and Senior Management Team which are the highest decision-making bodies in the banks, insurance companies, and pension and provident fund authorised by the government.

In the Bangladesh Parliament, 50 out of the 350 seats are reserved for women. At the sub-national level, 3 seats have been reserved for women. In Iran, Decree No. 1351824 dated 23 July 2016 by the Supreme Administrative Council assigns 30% of management positions to women in public and private sectors. The country also provides public and professional courses for capacity-building and improving managerial skills with the cooperation of the Training Centre for Public Management. In India, Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) in Panchayats are trained to empower them to govern their villages effectively and to develop them into grassroot change makers. In December 2019, the Maldives Parliament passed the Decentralisation Act with provisions to allocate 33 per cent of local council seats to women. This is the first time such a quota has been introduced in the country.

Nepal's Constitution ensures the mandatory representation of women in at least one third of total members elected from each political party in the Federal Parliament and Provincial Assembly. Similarly, the Constitution and Local Bodies' Election (Procedure) Act, 2016 ensures at least 40 per cent of women to be in municipal and rural municipal assemblies. The Local Bodies' Election (Procedure) Act, 2017 mandates that one out of two women members from each ward (that is constitutionally mandated) should be elected from the Dalit community.

In Pakistan, there is a 17 per cent quota for women in the Senate. Key steps have been taken to improve participation of women which include updating and improving the electoral rolls; administrative and legislative reforms such as re-polling in a constituency where the female turnout was below the prescribed threshold; and special measures to register female voters. Besides, measures are underway to increase women's representation in local governments. 10 per cent of civil service positions have been reserved for women.

For the 2018 elections, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) introduced electoral reforms to encourage women to contest in the general election. The Elections Act 2017 made it mandatory for political parties to issue a minimum number of tickets to women to contest elections.⁹ The Gender mainstreaming guidelines for ECP staff for effective recording of gender disaggregated results has allowed for gathering extensive data on women's voting behaviours and will feed into reforms in the future. The national review report noted that based on lessons learnt from the 2018 elections, the ECP will conduct gender sensitization sessions for the security and polling personnel deputed at polling stations.

Box 5 Study in Bhutan reveals underlying biases towards women in leadership

The Election Commission of Bhutan conducted the "Study of Determinants of Voter's Choice and Women's Participation in Elective Offices in the Kingdom of Bhutan" in 2014. It indicated that the underlying biases towards women in leadership exist, with 30.8 per cent of the respondents believing that men are better leaders and have the necessary qualities, mere 5.9 per cent saying women make good leaders, and 59.1 per cent of the respondents saying that both male and female make equally good leaders.

Source: [National review report of Bhutan](#)

Women's political participation faces challenges that resonate with women's engagement in other spheres. Firstly, care work and its attendant phenomena of time-poverty is a significant barrier to women venturing into politics and political participation. Secondly, there is a perception about leadership being seen as a male domain which unduly loads the die against women's foray into leadership positions. Thirdly, the prevalence of violence against women in political positions is another concerning factor.

Accountability and gender-responsive institutions

The presence of accountable, gender-responsive institutions is a key component to realise the vision of a gender-equal society. Gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) is a key mechanism for putting gender equality at the centre of national planning and budget decision-making. Several countries in the sub-region are taking actions to promote GRB.

Recent years in Afghanistan have seen an ongoing program of GRB training for government officials, a GRB pilot program involving six-line ministries and the Ministry of Finance (to be expanded), a gender audit of the national budget in 2016, and the drafting of a GRB policy under which a steering committee and Technical Working Committee (TWC) were established. GRB is prioritized by Afghanistan's National Action Plan for Women, with all ministries encouraged to spend at least 30 per

⁹ *Pakistan Elections 2018: Record Number of Women Candidates But Will They Win?*

See <http://pakrtidata.org/2018/07/24/pakistan-elections-2018-women-candidates/> accessed on 21/10/2020

cent of their development budget for programs and services that can empower Afghan women. With the GRB Strategic Plan 2015 prepared by the Ministry of Finance, the Afghan government aims to put in place processes to move forward in implementing GRB, in line with the national development priorities. A key component of the approach is the establishment of GRB units within each government entity, with quarterly reporting to the Administrative Office of the President, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Women's Affairs.

Bhutan has approved Gender Responsive Planning and Budgeting (GRPB) as a key strategy to support the implementation of gender mainstreaming targets of the 11th FYP. To provide strategic direction for GRPB, a "Strategic Framework and Action Plan for Gender Mainstreaming and Gender Responsive Planning and Budgeting in Bhutan" was developed. In Bhutan, over the last six years, the gender budget allocation has increased more than twice.

In Bangladesh, since 2015, the Sub-District Council has been instructed to spend 3 per cent of the total budget on the Women Development Forum and 25 per cent of the projects of the Council are to be implemented by women members. The budget can only be used to support education and employment of girls, cultural activities, and awareness raising.

To institutionalize gender budgeting, Gender Budgeting Cells (GBCs) have been put in place in 57 Ministries/Departments of Government of India. At the sub-national level, the new Guidelines for Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) 2018, has a dedicated section on Gender Responsive GPDP and incorporates gender as a cross cutting issue across the sections and themes. The GPDP is a gender-responsive planning system and process for transforming rural India and strengthening Gram Panchayats to drive economic development and social justice.

The Maldives enacted the Gender Equality Law 2016, which legally binds the government to carry out gender mainstreaming across the government institutions.

The Nepali government has developed a gender coding system according to which all government expenditure should fall in one of the three categories: directly responsive, indirectly responsive, and neutral. All sector ministries, the National Planning Commission, and the Ministry of Finance use this coding system and it is possible to know how much budget in total and across the sectors is allocated to gender responsive activities.

E. Peaceful and inclusive societies

Peaceful and inclusive societies require the meaningful participation of women in peace processes, security agreements, humanitarian action, conflict resolution, and crisis response. The Asia-Pacific region has witnessed numerous protracted conflicts, humanitarian crises, and natural disasters – all of which exacerbate women's vulnerability to violence, exploitation, and violation of their rights.

To advance the women, peace, and security agenda, countries in the sub-region have increased budgetary allocations for its implementation, integrated WPS commitments into key national and inter-ministerial policy, planning, and monitoring frameworks, and adopted/implemented a national action plan on WPS. Importantly, 2020 marks two decades since the passage of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

Afghanistan's National Action Plan (NAP 1325) on UNSCR 1325 provides the main national framework for promoting the engagement of women in peace and security. At the core of the NAP 1325 are women's participation in peace negotiations and peace settlement; women's participation in civil service institutions and security agencies; and women's participation in election processes. The implementation period of the NAP 1325 covers two phases: phase one from 2015-2018 and phase two from 2019-2021, with capacity development support from UN Women. Progress has included the

establishment of a roster of women in 34 provinces for participation in peace negotiations with the armed opposition in Afghanistan and abroad.

As a key strategic institution in Afghanistan's peace process, the High Peace Council (HPC) comprises 65 members of which 18 were women in 2019. Four women are now in the executive leadership level and actively take part in the decision-making process at HPC, demonstrating participation beyond simple inclusion. 63 members of the provincial peace committees are women. HPC's five-year strategic plan promotes the role of women in all sectors of the peace process. Supplementing the HPC is the Elite Women Advisory Board. Consisting of 66 members from 34 provinces, the board provides a consultation forum for the HPC.

Box 6 Increasing participation by women in Afghanistan's peace process despite persistent challenges

Increased participation by women in Afghanistan's national peace process is reflected by the 30 per cent representation of women in the Loya Jirga (national grand assembly) peace talks held in Kabul in 2019. Women chaired 13 of the 51 committees and were elected as two of the five Deputy Heads of Jirga. International efforts by OHCHR, UNAMA, UNDP, UN Women, and a range of other international actors have provided valuable support to the Afghan government and civil society peace initiatives. The Ministry of Women Affairs has also recently launched a Provincial Peace Consensus campaign with the participation of 15,000 women lawyers. However, progress towards greater involvement of women in peace processes, particularly peace talks currently with the Taliban, remains constrained by persistent extremist views in national politics, patriarchal social norms, and constant security threats.

Source: [National review report of Afghanistan](#)

In keeping with UNSC resolution 1325, Bhutan is committed to field more women peacekeepers and has achieved 15 per cent of women in its deployment as required by the United Nations.

In Bangladesh, a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security has been drafted and a Gender in Humanitarian Actions Working Group (GiHA WG) co-chaired by UN Women has been established to ensure gender-responsive disaster response and humanitarian action. The GiHA WG helped in the withdrawal of the restriction on female midwives and health workers to enter the refugee settlements after dark to ensure emergency services for the pregnant and other women during night-time. Nineteen Women Friendly Spaces (WFS) have been established by the national NGO Mukti with support from UNFPA. A midwife is deployed at every WFS to provide clinical management of rape, family planning and related SRH services.

Periodic and regular meetings of Iranian women's representatives with parliament members of other countries with special instructions for women, especially in the high-risk region of the Middle East, has been a major step to establish and maintain peace in the region, especially in the countries that are the victims of terrorism and extremism. For foreign nationals and immigrants, the country provides affordable healthcare opportunities and free education.

The government of Nepal has reported that it is in the final stage of drafting the National Action Plan II on UNSCR 1325 and 1820, building on the lessons learned from the first phase. The action plan aims to take onboard the recommendation of the UN Office of Special Representative of Secretary General on Sexual Violence on Conflict in this regard. The process of drafting ensured participation of the key stakeholders from government, civil society, women's groups, and development partners, and included a survivor.

Pakistan has reported that the proportion of women staff and Military Experts on Mission in United Nations peacekeeping missions has increased to 15 per cent. The country has formed “Female Engagement Teams”, consisting of women peacekeepers in the infantry battalion as per the UN requirement of Gender Balancing among the deployed troops. In the country, women police force is on the rise steadily. At present, 2 per cent of women constitute the total police force, and the government plans to increase this number in the coming years.

F. Environmental conservation, climate action and resilience-building

Environmental depletion and climate induced changes disproportionately impact women and add increased pressures on women’s time, income, health, nutrition and social support systems. To integrate gender concerns into environmental policies and disaster risk reduction, member States promoted women’s participation and leadership in environmental and natural resource management and governance, increased women’s access to and control over land, water, energy and other natural resources, and took measures to protect and preserve the knowledge and practices of women in indigenous and local communities related to traditional medicines, biodiversity, and conservation techniques.

To integrate gender concerns into policies and programs for disaster risk reduction, climate resilience, and mitigation, member States supported women’s participation and leadership, strengthened women’s access and control over land, water and other natural resources, strengthened evidence base and raised awareness about the vulnerability of women and girls to the impact of environmental degradation.

The Afghan Ministry of Women’s Affairs has played an active role with respect to women and the environment in Afghanistan. In 2017, the ministry reviewed a number of environmental policies with a view to better integrating gender and justice components, including in planning and monitoring frameworks. These included the Policy on the Sustainable Development of the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Policy on Minerals for Ministry of Mine and Petroleum, and the Gender Policy of Ministry of Energy and Water.

In Bhutan, gender concerns have been well integrated into the National Climate Change Policy and Climate Action Plans. In Bangladesh, 30 per cent women’s participation has been ensured in the local planning and management committee of forest resources. In the Village Conservation Forums (VCF), women members are to constitute a minimum of 30 per cent. Bangladesh is one of the few countries in the region with a Climate Change and Gender Action Plan.

In India, the provisions of the National Disaster Management Plan (NDMP) 2016 were made to ascertain special social support to single women and young children to survive the impact of disasters. Rehabilitation of the elderly, women and children have also been addressed through counselling sessions and training programs to make women self-reliant. Gender perspectives have been integrated into the several guidelines issued by the National Disaster Management Authority (2014-19).

Box 7 The Community Forestry Development Program, Nepal: An inclusive initiative

The Community Forestry Development Program (CFDP) Guideline, 2014 of Nepal reserves 50 per cent representation for women and proportional representation of Dalits, ethnic and marginalized communities in Executive Committees of Community Forest Users Groups. Additionally, the Community Forest User Group Financial Procedure Guidelines, 2016 requires the group to allocate 35 per cent from the total income to programs targeted for women, Dalit, and indigenous communities. Decisions of the group have to be taken in a participatory manner and the executive committees have to have a woman as either the President or the Secretary. As of 2019, 37 per cent of the committee members of the community forest user groups are women.

Source: [National review report of Nepal](#)

Iran has been implementing a capacity building plan and promotes social resilience in local communities through educational counselling workshops for representatives of indigenous social organizations. Educational-collaborative meetings have been organized in local communities, with an emphasis on marginalized and vulnerable areas and vulnerable people in the earthquake-inflicted areas.

In Nepal, the post-disaster needs assessment carried out in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake of 2015 included gender dimensions in the need assessment and consequently, gender dimensions were integrated in all sectoral policies and programs of individual line ministries and the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA). The NRA has established a Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) section and has adopted a GESI Policy for post-disaster reconstruction. It includes building women-friendly infrastructure including birthing centres and girls toilets in schools, and supporting women survivors for rebuilding their livelihoods through skills development, organizing women's co-operatives, and encouraging women to take up livelihood enhancing activities such as goat farming, poultry farming etc.

The national report submitted by Pakistan suggests the need for recruiting more women into the disaster responder workforce to better address the needs of women survivors. It also highlights the need to address the practice of early child marriage which is used as a coping strategy by families in the face of disasters. [See box 8]

Box 8 Violence and disaster response in Pakistan: challenges and setbacks

Disaster response is an area dominated by military first responders and male employees at government and district levels. A commitment in recruiting more women into the responder's workforce for rescue and relief provision is vital for mainstreaming gender and ensuring disaster response is geared to addressing needs of women and girls. The gathering of sex and age disaggregated data is another area of challenge for disaster response departments because there are insufficient women data gatherers to interface with affected women and girls especially around queries of violations and gender-based violence. Traditional practice of early girl child marriage is used as a coping mechanism by families to reduce mouths to feed, to shift responsibility of safety (and dignity) of young girls in conditions of displacement and to use bride-money as rehabilitation cash for the family. Though laws for a minimum age of 18 are under discussion for implementation across the provinces, there is a need for a dedicated budget for ensuring services, trained personnel and tracking of this adverse coping practice.

[Source: National review report of Pakistan](#)

National institutions, processes and partnerships to advance gender equality

The presence of relevant national institutions and processes are critical to implement and build synergies between the commitments made in the Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Although their organizational forms vary, national institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women play crucial advocacy, coordination and monitoring roles within each of the governments in the sub-region. All countries in the sub-region have reported the presence of national machineries (national coordination mechanism) for gender equality and empowerment of women and girls. All member States in the region have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and most countries consider gender equality as a key priority in national plans or strategies for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Ministry of Women's Affairs provides the main institutional mechanism for women's advancement and empowerment in Afghanistan. Its roots lie in the Bonn Agreement (2001) which laid the foundation for Afghanistan's Constitution. Under the ministry's supervision and guidance, state institutions are expected to mainstream gender in their policies, annual plans, and activities, and ministries are encouraged to dedicate at least 30 per cent of their budget to this end. The Ministry of Women Affairs has been accepted as a member of the presidential legislative committee after a great deal of advocacy and has developed 28 policies for the purpose of promoting women's empowerment. The Minister and Deputy Ministers of Women's Affairs are members of various institutional processes responsible for the implementation of SDGs.

The National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan provides the overarching framework for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, based on the pillars of participation, protection, prevention (of violence) and relief and recovery. The Ministry of Women Affairs is currently leading the preparation of the second national plan with a specific focus on the 12 areas of concerns adopted in the Beijing Declaration. In addition, women's economic empowerment is one of the 10 National Priority Programs approved within the Afghanistan Peace and Development Framework. Directions in this respect are provided by the Women's Economic Empowerment National Priority Program.

The National Commission on Women and Children (NCWC) as the national women's machinery in Bhutan coordinates and monitors the implementation of the critical areas of the BPFA. The Gender Expert Group (GEG), a pool of experts instituted in 2016 to provide technical backstopping to the NCWC and GFPs, also forms an important institutional mechanism. An online Gender Equality Monitoring System (GEMS) has been established to monitor the progress of gender mainstreaming initiatives in the sectors and generate periodic reports. The system has helped the NCWC in strengthening accountability of the sectors in gender mainstreaming.

In Bangladesh, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA) is the nodal ministry of the Government responsible for the development and protection of the rights of women and children. The Ministry has four different attached departments and agencies to implement activities at the field level, namely, the National Council for Women and Children Development (NCWCD), the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Women and Children, the Women in Development Focal Points Mechanism, and the Women's Development Implementation and Evaluation Committee.

The Ministry of Women and Child Development is the nodal ministry of the Government of India on all matters relating to women and children. In Iran, the Vice Presidency for Women and Family Affairs is the national machinery for gender equality and the empowerment of women. According to the Sixth National Development Plan on women's empowerment, the Vice Presidency for Women and Family

Affairs is obliged to prepare an executive act on gender equity and determine the organization and monitoring frameworks required to achieve gender equality.

In the Maldives, the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Service is currently the national women's machinery. In Nepal, the Ministry of Women Children and Senior Citizen (MOWCSC) is the dedicated national machinery for the advancement of women. In Pakistan, the National Commission on Status of Women (NCSW) is the national lead gender equality entity. This entity works in close collaboration with the Ministry of Human Rights. In Turkey, the General Directorate on the Status of Women (GDSW) is the national mechanism to advance gender equality and empowerment of women and girls.

The national machineries face many challenges in the sub-region. Inadequate budget allocation to fulfil all gender goals and targets is a key issue. Lack of coordination and cooperation between different line ministries, different institutions, and local governments is another area that needs to be made robust. The weak technical capacities of the staff and a lack of understanding and political will to further gender equality are other commonly faced challenges. Overcoming these challenges would enable countries in the sub-region to gain momentum in their journey towards an inclusive sustainable development.

To advance gender equality in the sub-region, it is necessary for the countries to foster partnerships and collaborations with the private sector, civil society organisations, as well as international development partners. Bringing together the diverse stakeholders under a common platform will enable countries to accelerate their journey towards gender equality. Several countries in the region have partnered with CSOs and development agencies to ensure decent work, promote women's entrepreneurship, prevent violence against women, and to ensure sexual and reproductive services for women and children in emergency settings. By harnessing the synergies between different stakeholders, governments can catalyse their journey towards gender equality.

“Maldives gender machinery is one of the institutions, which is subjected to frequent changes as when the government changes and also due to government policy changes. It is also one of the Ministries which is under-resourced (challenged with financial and human resources) to attend to the whole social development sector. At the same time the Ministry is one of the institutions, which has one of the highest staff turnovers whereby staffs leaving due to frustrations, lack of budget and due to the frequent structural changes subjected to the Ministry”

[National review report of Maldives](#)

Data and statistics

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development considers data as one of the key means of implementation. The Beijing Platform for Action recommends governments to produce and disseminate statistics disaggregated by sex. Data gaps in gender statistics is a key impediment to advance gender equality in the region.

Seven out of nine targets (six targets and three means of implementation) of Goal 5 have been reported to have insufficient data in the sub-region. These include data regarding violence against women and girls, early marriage, unpaid work, reproductive health and rights, equal economic rights, use of technology, and gender equality policies. There are also gaps in the data available on the most vulnerable groups of women: older women, women with HIV/AIDS, and women with disabilities.

Over the last five years, with respect to gender statistics, countries have made most progress in conducting new surveys to produce national baseline information on gender-related topics, produced knowledge products on gender statistics and promulgated laws, regulations, or statistical program/strategy setting out the development of gender statistics.

Afghanistan has seen a range of initiatives on gender statistics in the last five years. These include the promulgation of laws, regulations, strategies and programs; the production of knowledge products on gender statistics (a third of government departments have produced user-friendly reports, policy briefs and research papers); and the use of more gender-sensitive data in the formulation of policies and implementation of programs and projects. The Central Statistical Office (CSO) has further generated key national health and living standards surveys that have explicitly defined the lag in women's development indicators. This has allowed the government and international partners to target women's empowerment programs with greater accuracy and has established baselines against which the growth and progress can be measured. Guidelines have also been produced under the guidance of the Ministry of Women's Affairs to support the generation of sex disaggregated data by NGOs.

In Bhutan, the NCWC developed the Gender Equality Monitoring System (GEMS) in 2015 to manage, monitor, and track progress on gender mainstreaming activities implemented by different sectors and agencies in the country. Currently, the GEMS is accessed and used by a network of gender focal points at the national and local government level to plan and report progress on gender mainstreaming activities. The system manages data and information on 52 indicators towards achieving seven outputs: women's access to health services, women's access to education, participation of women in sustainable rural development, female youth unemployment, women's competency and skills in entrepreneurship, mechanisms to address violence/sexual harassment against women, and women's participation in governance and decision-making. A Gender Sensitive Indicator Handbook was developed in 2017 to improve the collection of sex disaggregated data and adoption of uniform indicators to measure progress towards achieving parity between men and women.

Bangladesh published the latest Gender Compendium in 2018 titled Gender Statistics and is planning a time use survey that will help them to address gender data gaps in SDG indicators. The Islamic Republic of Iran annually publishes the 'Women and Family Atlas' – a statistical atlas covering 40 indicators on the status of women at the national and local levels. In Nepal, the government plans to conduct new surveys where data gaps are apparent. For example, during the 15th Plan period (2019/20-2024/25), a National Time Use Survey is expected to take place to measure the extent of women's care work. The gender data needs will also inform the design of the National Population and Housing Census which is set to take place in 2021. Seven countries in the region collect gender-disaggregated data in their major surveys.

Countries in the sub-region face many challenges with respect to gender data. These are: scarce use and analysis of gender-disaggregated data, lack of coordination and sharing of data among ministries and government organizations and agencies, and lack of expertise on gender statistics. Going forward, in the next five years, countries plan to focus on using more gender-sensitive data in the formulation of policies and implementation of programs; utilizing and/or improving administrative-based or alternative data sources to address gender data gaps and re-processing of existing data to produce more disaggregated and/or new gender statistics.

Key priorities and recommendations

Eliminating violence against women and girls

Despite the efforts of countries to address violence, the countries in the sub-region have a long way to go to eliminate violence. In the coming five years, eliminating violence against women and girls is a key priority in the sub-region. A focus needs to be put on implementing efficiently the mechanisms in place to prevent and eliminate GBV, adopt SOPs for the provision of services to survivors, devise more evidence-based policy making and coordination mechanisms between different stakeholders, strengthen awareness building among the general public as well as law enforcement personnel, build partnerships with CSOs, the private sector and development agencies to raise awareness about gender-based violence.

Countries across the sub-region have adopted measures to address the problem of violence against women and girls. The weight of gender norms, societal stigma, and stereotypes are silent allies that condone violent acts and prevent women from seeking legal recourse against violence. Despite the adoption of progressive legislations, policies and programs, violence continues unabated.

Recommendations:

- I. Enhance the implementation of laws, regulations, and action plans in place to address GBV.
- II. Provide gender training for enforcement officers in the judiciary and police forces as well as health forces to ensure laws and action plans turn into reality.
- III. Develop EAW prosecution units with women prosecutors and EAW courts which tries cases relating to incidence of GBV.
- IV. Establish women police stations and women complaint centers through which survivors could take recourse to justice smoothly.
- V. Strengthen data collection and evidence on violence against women and girls, including new and emergent forms of violence.
- VI. Capacitate relevant personnel on gender statistics, its analysis, and how it can inform evidence-based policy making.
- VII. Develop SoPs to ensure minimum standards in the provision of services to survivors of violence and enhance coordination among the various agencies.
- VIII. Adopt comprehensive anti-trafficking legal and regulatory frameworks and strategies. Provide protection, rehabilitation, repatriation, and reintegration assistance to survivors.
- IX. Establish linguistically and culturally appropriate and accessible multisectoral services for survivors of violence, including migrant women and girls and children.
- X. Organize Comprehensive Sexuality Education classes at schools and provide information on sexual and reproductive health to youth and adolescents.
- XI. Adopt measures to ensure the continued engagement of girl children in education to prevent child, early and forced marriages.
- XII. Collaborate with all relevant stakeholders, including civil society organizations, and engage men and boys and women and girls, religious leaders, to raise awareness about violence prevention. Sharing stories of survivors and their fight for justice would normalize the reporting of violent incidents.
- XIII. Disseminate violence prevention information and run advocacy actions using public media.
- XIV. Formulate media guidelines on gender-responsive reporting to improve the quality of reporting on issues affecting gender equality and women's empowerment.
- XV. Develop legislations to protect the rights of women and girls in the digital space and to prevent cyber-bullying and child pornography.

Political participation of women

The South and South West Asian sub-region does not fare favourably in women's political participation, compared to the Asia-Pacific region. For the sub-region as a whole, the average political participation of women has not changed much over the last five years. At 17 per cent, it lags behind the regional and global figures of 20 and 25 per cent respectively. Women's political participation and leadership in the sub-region face challenges that resonate with women's engagement in other spheres. Firstly, care work and its attendant phenomena of time-poverty is a significant barrier to women venturing into politics and political participation. Secondly, there is a perception of leadership as a male domain which unduly loads the die against women's foray into leadership positions. Thirdly, the prevalence of violence against women in political positions is another concerning factor. Addressing these factors can have a positive impact on women's political participation and leadership.

Recommendations:

- I. Promote positive role models from all spaces to influence women's leadership aspirations and approaches.
- II. Adopt temporary special measures such as gender quotas, for parliamentary and local governance representation.
- III. Expand and protect civic space for women's organizations and networks.
- IV. Challenge norms that prevent women from becoming leaders by engaging in community dialogue, awareness raising and sustaining dialogue with men.
- V. Create mentoring and networking events for women leaders.
- VI. Conduct mock parliaments at national and sub-national events to expose women to the machinations of political participation and generate interest in pursuing it.
- VII. Support women candidates to contest elections through sustained mentorship and training.
- VIII. Provide gender-responsive infrastructure and public services, including early education, childcare and older care facilities which will enable women to free-up time that can be used for community engagement.
- IX. Incentivise the private sector to promote women into managerial positions.
- X. Develop affirmative action to promote women in leadership positions in national civil services, government enterprises, institutions and agencies.
- XI. Election commissions must develop policies that can enhance women's political participation as contestants as well as voters.

Economic Empowerment of Women

For women's economic empowerment to be a reality, labour market policies need to respond to the lived realities of women's everyday lives. Discriminatory norms and gender stereotypes hinder the fair economic participation of women in the region, be it in terms of equal pay, pay equity, recruitment, retention or promotion. The pervasiveness of violence and harassment at workplaces prevents women from engaging in economic activities. Member States must address the growing informality of paid work done by women and support the unpaid care and domestic work done by women outside their homes.

Recommendations:

- I. Adopt gender-responsive labour market policies, including affirmative action appropriate family leave policy and flexible work arrangements to attract women to engage in economic activities.
- II. Support the transitioning of informal to formal economy with the aid of ILO Recommendation 204.
- III. Adopt laws, policies, and regulations to promote women's career advancement in public and private sectors.
- IV. Adopt laws, policies, and regulations to prevent and redress sexual harassment at the workplace. Ensure managers undergo training to respond appropriately to cases of sexual

harassment and violence. Career advancement of managers could take into consideration their treatment of sexual harassment cases.

- V. Strengthen the provision of childcare and older care provisions to support the burden of unpaid work. Such provisions need to incorporate the needs of single-parents, parents whose children have disabilities, and ensure a fair treatment to the care workers.
- VI. Ensure an enabling policy environment to support women entrepreneurs rectifying the financial, technological, and scaling-up challenges faced by women entrepreneurs.

Access to health care [SDG 5]

For countries in the sub-region, access to health care is a key priority in the coming five years. Countries should continue their efforts in streamlining health services through integration and provide quality, affordable, and accessible healthcare services to all women, including women in remote and rural areas.

Recommendations:

- I. Accelerate progress towards achieving the goal of universal health coverage for all women and girls of all ages, while ensuring that the use of such services and medicines does not expose the users to financial hardship.
- II. Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action.
- III. Recognize that women's rights include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual, and reproductive health and reproductive rights, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence.
- IV. Ensure the survival, protection, development, and advancement of the girl child by enacting and enforcing laws and policies aimed at preventing and ending violence against women in all its forms and harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation, and by providing support for married girls, pregnant girls, adolescent mothers and girls in informal unions.
- V. Address mental health issues as an essential step required for women and children who are victims of violence.
- VI. Emphasize the use of media, including national and local media, mainstream broadcast and print media, and electronic digital media, to raise awareness and inform women and girls, appropriately supported by their families and legal guardians, about available healthcare services, preventive health information, and sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights.

Gender-Responsive Budgeting

Countries stressed the importance of gender-responsive budgeting in fulfilling their commitments to the development of a gender-equal society. Efforts should be directed towards supporting its institutionalization and ensure the collection of gender-disaggregated data in all ministries and departments to enable the mainstreaming of GRB into policies, program design and implementation.

Recommendations:

- I. Collect gender-disaggregated data and analyze it to support gender-responsive planning and budgeting.
- II. Promote gender-responsive budgeting at the sub-national levels.
- III. Establish GRB units within every government unit so that the practice of gender budgeting can be institutionalized.
- IV. Develop a legal basis for GRB and support it with an action plan/strategy that aligns it with the national development priorities.
- V. Address the capacity gaps in gender responsive budgeting by providing training to responsible officials.

Key messages

Address violence in a comprehensive manner, focusing on implementation, awareness-spreading, data generation, and forging collaborations.

Countries in the sub-region have adopted laws, policies, and action plans to address gender-based violence. Several countries have adopted measures to tackle newer forms of violence mediated by technology and the internet, to prevent adolescent pregnancies and early marriages, and to address the problem of trafficking of women and girls. Countries are also providing support services for survivors of violence, including in emergency situations. Despite these measures, violence against women persists. Countries need to focus on implementation of existing laws, policies, and action plans by training justice and police personnel, as well as health responders; spreading awareness amongst the general public to normalise the reporting of violent incidents; generating data and using it to inform policy-making and, forging partnerships with civil society, the private sector, religious leaders, and development partners to prevent GBV.

Normalize women in leadership through raising awareness, providing incentives, fostering partnerships, and providing institutional care support.

Countries in the sub-region regard women's leadership as one of the key elements for empowering women and girls. Countries have adopted temporary special measures and affirmative action to increase the presence of women leaders in parliaments, civil service, and the private sector. However, the weight of patriarchy presents an invisible barrier that prevents women from fully realizing their potential as leaders. By normalizing women in leadership, countries can tackle the adverse social norms which prevent women from being leaders in the first place. This can be done by raising public awareness, as well as awareness in public institutions and corporate set ups, providing appropriate incentives for the private sector and political parties to promote women in leadership positions, fostering partnerships with civil society, the private sector, and development partners to promote women in leadership and provide institutional support such as childcare and older care that can free up time that could be used to engage in leadership activities.

Support women's economic empowerment by extending benefits to the informal sector, supporting women entrepreneurs, and ensuring adequate infrastructure for carrying out care work.

Women's labour force participation in the sub-region at 22 per cent is considerably lower than ESCAP's regional average at 44 per cent and the global average of 47 per cent. Additionally, according to available data cited earlier in this document¹⁰, the bulk of the working women is engaged in the informal sector, devoid of social protection and health benefits. This is a key concern for the sub-region for the coming years. Going forward, decent work for women could be provided by extending benefits to workers in the informal sector, including the promotion of women's entrepreneurship, making provision for institutional support in fulfilling domestic responsibilities in the form of adequate child and older care, appropriate family leave policies, incentivising the private sector to provide childcare services and entering into productive partnerships that can better the lives of working women. Special policies and programs to promote women's participation in TVET and skill development should be devised. Women's entrepreneurship should be promoted and advanced as a means to decent work, with proper protections and support in place. Special attention needs to be paid to ensure decent work for domestic workers, migrant workers, care workers, and women in rural areas.

¹⁰ See Table 2

Provide accessible, affordable and quality healthcare services, improve awareness about sexual and reproductive health and rights and create effective partnerships to achieve universal health coverage.

Going forward, the sub-region needs to focus on accessible, affordable, and quality healthcare solutions, particularly for women in rural and remote areas. An integrated health policy framework that uses existing maternal and infant health infrastructure to provide other health services such as screenings for non-communicable diseases, like breast and cervical cancers, could be key in ensuring better coverage and quality health services using existing resources. Continued focus on adolescents' sexual and reproductive health rights would be critical to prevent adolescent pregnancies and early marriages. Through effective partnerships, countries would be able to generate awareness amongst youth and families on sexual and reproductive health, including in emergency situations. Building partnerships and collaborations with CSOs, the private sector, religious leaders, and development partners could build synergies that would catalyse universal health coverage.

Institutionalize the allocation of funds for gender equality through Gender Responsive Budgeting.

To advance gender equality in the sub-region, countries need to continue their efforts regarding gender responsive budgeting. GRB will ensure that adequate funds are available and allocated for gender equality across all areas of national and sub-national budgets. In the meantime, focus on the integration of gender into national budget, develop technical capacities, and develop a legal basis for GRB.