



Strengthening gender statistics and indicators in Asia and the Pacific: a key foundation for the sustainable development agenda beyond 2015

This Stats Brief outlines the need to enhance commitments and investments to strengthen gender statistics and indicators in the Asia-Pacific region in order to facilitate monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals and other national, regional and global commitments towards achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Member States recently adopted gender indicator sets at the global and regional levels, which can serve as a starting point and an impetus for action to renew and strengthen efforts at the national and regional levels to speed up the improvement of gender-sensitive data. The Brief highlights existing challenges in the region in producing the core sets and gender-sensitive statistics, as well as key actions that governments can take to integrate a gender perspective in the production, dissemination and use of statistics in order to build a critical foundation for monitoring the relevant targets of the Sustainable Development Goals with the principle of “leaving no one behind”.

Gender inequality is one of the most pervasive forms of inequality and a human rights concern. Promoting gender equality and empowering women are key policy priorities, and gender statistics are an important means to inform related policy and programme decisions. Transformative and gender-sensitive statistics are essential for systematic and effective measurement and monitoring of progress towards women’s empowerment and the achievement of equality between women and men.

Effective monitoring and analyses of gender gains and gaps requires disaggregation of all data by sex as a prerequisite and a necessary first step towards providing better information on women and men. However, gender statistics are more than data disaggregated by sex. Compilation of gender statistics must also involve collecting data on specific issues that affect one sex more than the other, affect women exclusively, or relate to gender relations between women and men. Gender statistics therefore, need to capture all aspects of the lives of women and men, reflect gender issues, and take into account factors that may induce gender biases. Accordingly, not only is it essential to reflect the different perspectives, priorities and needs of women and men in all statistical themes, but also in all statistical processes, including the development of definitions and classifications, data collection, compilation, analyses and dissemination.

In addition, the process for improving gender statistics requires a supporting institutional environment as a “means” to the “end”, including relevant legislative frameworks, gender-sensitive budgets, as well as effective coordination mechanisms among relevant stakeholders at the national level, given the cross-cutting nature of gender inequality issues.

Most ESCAP members States and associate members have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and gender equality and women’s empowerment issues have been a part of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). At the same time, this year marks the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which provides a comprehensive framework to link discussions on gender issues; mainstreaming gender in planning, programming and policy-making; and the need for statistics. The need to monitor these commitments has driven data collection efforts over the last few decades, though for instance, the MDGs missed some critical dimensions such as violence against women and women’s unpaid work.

In keeping with the principle of “leaving no one behind” and in light of the fact that addressing gender inequalities can provide a catalytic effect to addressing various aspects of inclusive and sustainable development and human rights, including socio-economic and human development, the relation between the environment and human populations, good governance, peace and justice, etc., not only has a comprehensive, stand-alone goal on gender equality and empowerment of women and girls (Goal 5) been proposed in the current draft of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹, but the importance of improving the availability of and access to data and statistics disaggregated by sex, and the mainstreaming of gender perspectives across the SDGs are being emphasised.²

The need for member States to uphold and fully implement commitments made through such international conventions and development objectives, as well as through national

programmes and policies, designed to ensure women's equal rights, access and opportunities for participation and leadership in the economy and society as a whole cannot be emphasised enough. In order to make these commitments a lived reality for women and girls, the urgency to strengthen gender statistics and indicators across all world regions is becoming more prominent than ever before.

A snapshot of Asia-Pacific's progress towards improving gender statistics, and persisting challenges

The Asia-Pacific region has seen very diverse levels of national development in the area of gender statistics, both in terms of data collection and availability, as well as the supporting institutional environment. Results, from a Global Review of Gender Statisticsⁱ conducted in the Asia-Pacific region in 2012-13 revealed that while familiarity with the concept of gender mainstreaming existed, and gender statistics entities were present in most national statistical offices that responded to the review, similar entities were not present in all parts of the national statistical system, such as in other government ministries or agencies.

At the same time, most country responses reported on the existence of laws and regulations governing the production and/or dissemination of gender statistics, though the effectiveness of the laws in shaping the nature of responsibilities and tasks covered by existing gender statistics entities was not immediately clear. While most statistical offices in the region engaged in a limited amount of gender data compilation, dissemination, production of publications, and addressing user requests, training and methodological work on gender statistics were less commonly covered, and the institutionalisation of such training in the national statistical system was evidently weak.

Collaboration between national statistical offices and line ministries was usually limited to traditional areas of gender statistics such as on health, education and labour market, with not much evidence of extending collaboration in other emerging areas. User-producer collaboration was often limited to choice of topics related to gender statistics or dissemination of statistical outputs, with limited or no collaboration and dialogue on, for example, advancing

methodological work or the development of new data collection programmes.

Production gaps for gender-sensitive data were apparent in a large number of conventional areas such as child marriage, agriculture, informal employment and disability, as well as in more emerging areas such as measuring violence against women, unpaid work, entrepreneurship, power and decision-making, information and communication technology, media, and developing satellite accounts. In most cases conventional data sources continued to be used such as population census, demographic and health surveys, labour force surveys, health/education administrative records, with expansion towards special data collection on such issues as violence against women or unpaid work being infrequent or non-existent.

Awareness raising on gender equality issues, developing national plans/goals for gender statistics, conducting gender-focused surveys, developing gender databases, and conducting gender-related data dissemination were some immediate national priorities that were identified by countries that responded. Some priority thematic areas that were identified included women's unpaid work, women in decision making, women in entrepreneurship, and gender-based violence.

Most importantly, a majority of countries that responded reported that they operated only on the basis of *ad hoc* budgets for gender statistics, which in fact emerged as one of the key impediments for the improvement of gender statistics at the national level.

Strengthening gender statistics in the Asia-Pacific region: recent impetus

Key issues on gender equality and women's empowerment that are common across countries and regions are embodied in a global minimum set of gender indicatorsⁱⁱ, consisting of quantitative indicators across five domains as well as qualitative indicators covering norms and laws on gender equality³. This list, as "a guide for the national production and international compilation of gender statistics"⁴, was developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Gender Statistics (IAEG-GS), comprising experts from national statistical systems and international agencies, as a response to recent emphasis by the United Nations Statistical Commission on the urgency to improve gender statistics. Indicators specific to regional and national contexts were to be added by regional and national entities.

ⁱ Conducted by the United Nations Statistics Division in collaboration with the United Nations Regional Commissions, as part of the follow-up actions to decisions made by the 42nd Session of the United Nations Statistical Commission. National statistical offices, in collaboration with relevant national stakeholders from twenty-five countries in the Asia-Pacific region responded: Armenia; Azerbaijan; Bangladesh; Bhutan; Cambodia; China; French Polynesia; Hong Kong, China; Iran (Islamic Republic of); Japan; Kazakhstan; Kyrgyzstan; Macau, China; Malaysia; Mongolia; New Caledonia; New Zealand; Niue; Philippines; Russian Federation; Singapore; Tajikistan; Thailand; Timor-Leste; and Viet Nam.

ⁱⁱ Also referred to as the "global minimum set" here.

Recognising the critical role of gender statistics in providing data for the fulfilment of commitments on gender equality and women's empowerment, and in strengthening the production and dissemination of information required to inform gender equality policies, the Committee on Statistics at its fourth session in March 2015 strongly endorsed a core set of gender indicators for Asia and the Pacificⁱⁱⁱ "as a guide for setting national priorities and focusing regional support for improving the production and dissemination of gender-responsive statistics".⁵ The development of the regional core set was facilitated by ESCAP through a series of consultations and surveys with national statistical systems, national mechanisms for the advancement of women, development planning institutions, international development agencies and academia in the region. While the regional core set incorporates the global minimum set as the foundation for facilitating global monitoring, it goes further by including a region-specific context by addressing regional gender policy priorities and needs. It is organised along four broad categories of indicators⁶: basic domains, supplementary domains, a priority target group (rural women), and qualitative indicators related to national norms.

The selection of domains and indicators in the regional core set were based on an agreed set of criteria that: (a) the issues should be relevant for gender equality and women's empowerment, and priorities for related national policy-making in the Asia-Pacific region; (b) the selection of indicators should not be constrained by concerns related to limited data availability, coverage or other related difficulties; and (c) internationally agreed concepts and definitions should be available and uniform, to the extent possible, to ensure accuracy, reliability and regional comparability.

Though not prescriptive, the regional core set represents a minimum range of gender statistics that all countries in the Asia-Pacific region should aspire to produce and disseminate on a regular basis. It provides a strong impetus to anchor, reinforce and provide strategic direction to efforts pertaining to the integration of a gender perspective across national statistical systems and in all regional programmes on statistics.

While issues covered in the regional core set are identified as national policy priorities, as such clear and consistent definitions or statistical methodologies may not exist as of yet for all the indicators. As a live set of indicators, updates or extensions in due course would be done based on methodological developments, emerging policy issues, changes in the global minimum set, as well as discussions pertaining to the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015.

How ready are countries in the region to produce and use the core set of gender indicators for Asia and the Pacific?

A region-wide review of the draft regional core set^{iv} conducted by ESCAP in 2014 provides some insight into data availability and existing data sources for the indicators. While national statistical offices were the primary responsible to complete the review, stakeholders most commonly consulted at the national level were ministries of education; health; home affairs; labour; planning; and women, youth and children.

Data availability^v

The results of the region-wide review revealed that data collection and production of the indicators were strongest for conventional domains such as "Education" and "Health and related services" (more than 62 per cent of respondents), while data collection and production of the indicators in more emerging areas such as "Participation in unremunerated productive work" and "Environment" were weak.

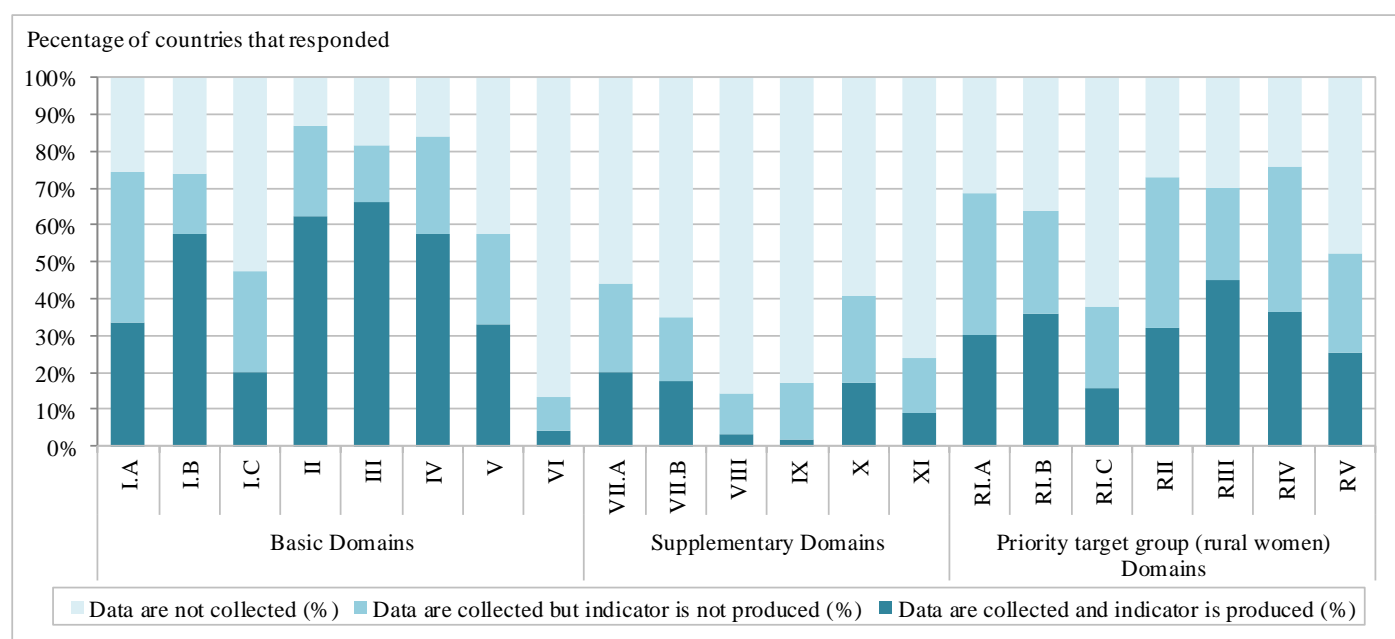
In domains such as "Environment", "Refugees" and "Disaster risk reduction", more than 80 per cent of respondents indicated that they had not collected data, pointing to the possible need for further methodological improvements and capacity development in these domains.

While data on "Poverty" was usually available at the national level, the proposed indicators were either not produced or not disaggregated along rural-urban lines by around 40 per cent of respondents. Similarly in the "Education" domain, over 40 per cent of countries that responded indicated that data were collected but indicators were not produced with rural disaggregation.

^{iv} Thirty-six Asia-Pacific countries responded to the region-wide review in 2014: Afghanistan; American Samoa; Armenia; Australia; Azerbaijan; Bangladesh; Bhutan; Cambodia; China; Fiji; Georgia; Hong Kong, China; India; Iran (Islamic Republic of); Japan; Kazakhstan; Kyrgyzstan; Macao, China; Malaysia; Maldives; Mongolia; Nepal; New Caledonia; New Zealand; Palau; Papua New Guinea; Philippines; Republic of Korea; Russian Federation; Samoa; Singapore; Sri Lanka; Thailand; Tonga; Turkey; and Viet Nam.

^v Figures reflected here are averages of the response for all "headline" or "supporting" indicators, as applicable, in each domain.

ⁱⁱⁱ Also referred to as the "regional core set" here.

Figure 1: Data availability, by domain (percentage of countries that responded in the Asia-Pacific region)^{vi}**Basic Domains**

- I.A. Poverty
- I.B. Participation in productive activities
- I.C. Participation in unremunerated productive work
- II. Education
- III. Health and related services
- IV. Governance and participation in public life and decision making
- V. Human rights of women and girls
- VI. Environment and climate change

Supplementary Domains

- VII.A. International labour migration: (Countries of destination)
- VII.B. International labour migration: (Countries of origin)

- VIII. Refugees
- IX. Disaster risk reduction
- X. Social protection (Population ageing)
- XI. Peace and security

Priority target group (rural women) Domains

- RI.A. Poverty
- RI.B. Participation in productive activities
- RI.C. Participation in unremunerated productive work
- RII. Education
- RIII. Health and related services
- RIV. Governance and participation in public life and decision making
- RV. Human rights of women and girls

There were also wide subregional disparities in the readiness to produce and use the regional core set. For some of the basic domains, such as “Poverty”, “Participation in unremunerated productive work” and “Governance and participation in public life and decision-making”, North and Central Asia as a subregion did relatively better than other subregions in terms of the data collected and indicators produced, while for other basic domains, such as “Education”, “Health and related services” and “Environment”, South-East Asia did relatively better. The related results for data availability across subregions were somewhat mixed for the supplementary domains.

Data sources

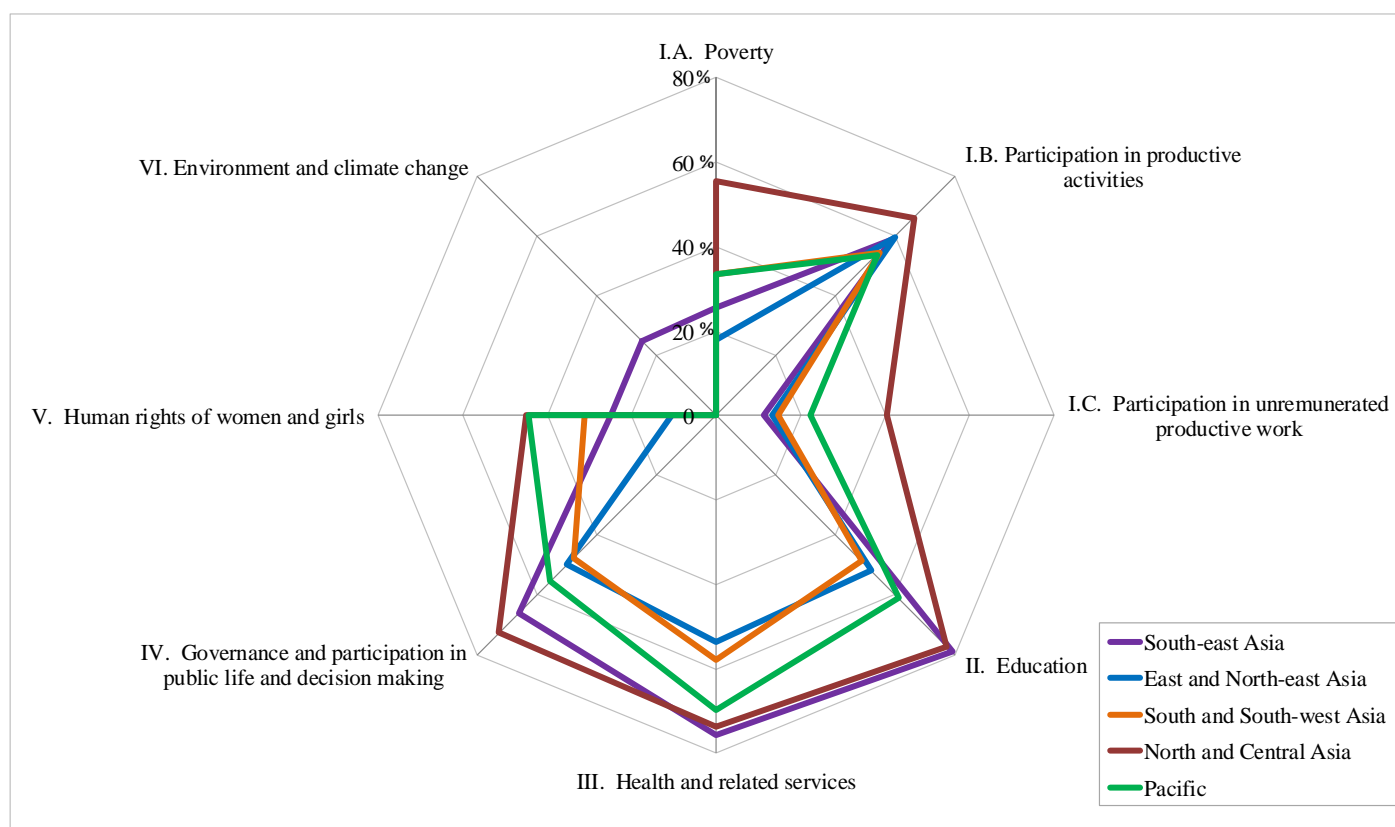
The most common data sources for the indicators in the regional core set mentioned by respondents include: population and housing censuses; household surveys such as the labour force surveys; household income and expenditure surveys; multiple indicator (cluster) surveys; and demographic and health surveys.

In some cases, respondents mentioned special surveys, such as employment surveys, ICT surveys, time-use surveys, and violence against women surveys. For some indicators, administrative sources or the relevant ministries were cited as data providers.

These results suggest that there is much room to expand the sources of official statistics to address gender equality and empowerment of women in the region, including through the use of more administrative data and big data.

^{vi} In order to assess data availability, for each indicator in the draft regional core set, the region-wide review questionnaire asked if (i) data are collected and indicator is produced in the country, or (ii) data are collected but indicator is not produced in the country, or (iii) data are not collected in the country. While a total of 36 Asia-Pacific countries responded to the region-wide review, the response rate for the data availability question varied for each indicator. The percentages reflected here are averages of the response for all “headline” or “supporting” indicators, as applicable, in each domain.

Figure 2: Subregional variation: “Basic domains” for which “data are collected and indicator is produced” (percentage of countries that responded in the Asia-Pacific region)^{vi}



The way forward: harnessing synergies between the core set of gender indicators for Asia and the Pacific and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The cross-cutting nature of gender equality and women's empowerment issues makes the collection, analysis, and use of data disaggregated by sex and gender statistics indispensable in the design, implementation, and monitoring of the SDGs. Given the wide range of domains covered by the global minimum set and regional core set derived therefrom, several of the indicators in these sets could potentially be used to monitor various targets set out under the SDGs. In other words, these existing gender indicator sets could serve as starting points to renew and step up efforts to strengthen data collection, analysis, and use on issues pertaining to gender equality and women's empowerment in preparation for monitoring the SDGs.

Efforts in the region could begin by a review by national statistical systems of the extent to which their current data collection processes adequately represent the different perspectives and situations of women and men. Where change is required, regional and national strategies could be developed around the regional core set as a first step, to progressively modify data collection methods - through methodological development and improved capacity, in

order to produce more gender-sensitive statistics. At the same time, the regional core set could serve as an initial guide to review institutional mechanisms, promote regional cooperation and mobilise support from relevant regional and national stakeholders, and to thereby, focus national efforts.

In addition, a comprehensive regional approach in preparation for monitoring the SDGs would require the integration of a gender perspective in the production and dissemination of all official statistics. Integrating gender perspectives throughout the statistical system requires methodological improvements in both data coverage and quality, spanning all thematic areas, as well as in all stages and processes of statistical production. In operationalising such an approach, gender-sensitive perspectives need to be made an integral part of the content, structure and methods of data collection, as well as in data compilation, dissemination and analysis. Mainstreaming gender perspectives in the design or amendment of national policy frameworks or national strategies for the development of statistics are also key in this process. In addition, what cannot be overlooked in this process is the need for women's active and equitable involvement in decision-making pertaining to for example, what data need to be collected, how they should be collected and how they should be used in order to fully account for their needs and concerns.

In line with international practice, ESCAP aims to promote the integration of a gender perspective across national statistical systems and in all its regional programmes on statistics, with the regional core set serving as an anchor to provide strategic direction to such efforts and to thereby improve the quality of all statistics being produced in the region. At the same time, methodological improvements and strengthened capacity in statistics would require the active participation and contribution of the Asia-Pacific region in global discussions on statistical standards, methodologies and related testing in various thematic areas being pursued - for example, by the IAEG-GS (violence against women, unpaid work, etc.); the Evidence and Data for Gender Equality project (EDGE) (asset ownership and entrepreneurship); and other areas under the guidance of the United Nations Statistical Commission.

In addition to issues concerning the supply side, the demand for gender statistics and indicators needs to be strengthened in the region. The processes of collecting gender-responsive data, compiling related statistics and generating relevant indicators require considerable investments to build statistical competence and gain commitment from relevant stakeholders to mobilise funding and allocate time. Such investments can only be justified in response to the demands of a large and active user base, including policymakers across all sectors, as well as civil society partners.

The Ministerial Declaration of the Asian and Pacific Conference on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Beijing+20 Review^{vii} emphasised the need "to strengthen national statistical offices and systems to produce, analyse and disseminate reliable and comparable gender statistics and data disaggregated by sex, age, disability and other relevant categories, in a timely manner, through increased financial and technical investment, and strengthen the capacity of policymakers to interpret and use available data for evidence-based policy, programming and planning decisions and to monitor progress in the implementation of the Platform for Action".⁷

An approach here would be for national statistical offices and other statistics producers at the national level to not only identify the needs and capacities of users and potential users, but to develop their own capacity to present statistics and indicators in ways that are useful for users, and can be easily understood and interpreted, as well as to advocate for the regular use of gender-sensitive data as a basis for evidence-based policy-making.

Therefore, enhancing commitments and investments to improve gender statistics and indicators in the region could serve as a foundation and a strong stimulus to prepare for monitoring of the SDG goal on gender equality and empowerment of women and girls in particular, and other SDG goals in general, and to improve related accountability. While collecting gender-responsive data and generating gender-responsive statistics is the ultimate responsibility of national statistical systems, technical support from regional and international statistical bodies is important to link national and regional capacity development with ongoing and future global discussions and initiatives, including those related to the SDGs, and other international commitments.

References

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- ³ United Nations Statistical Commission, Forty-sixth session, *Gender Statistics: Report of the Secretary General* [E/CN.3/2015/21].
- ⁴ United Nations Statistical Commission, *Report on the forty-fourth session*, Economic and Social Council, Official Records 2013, Supplement No. 4 [E/CN.3/2013/33].
- ⁵ Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, *Report of the Committee on Statistics on its fourth session* [E/ESCAP/CST(4)/14, para. 91].
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- ⁷ Asian and Pacific Conference on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Beijing+20 Review, *Report of the Conference* [E/ESCAP/GEWE/2, chap. I, para. 57(z)].

For more information regarding ESCAP's work in statistics development please visit:

<http://www.unescap.org/our-work/statistics>

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^{vii} Organised by the ESCAP, in collaboration with UN Women, in November 2014