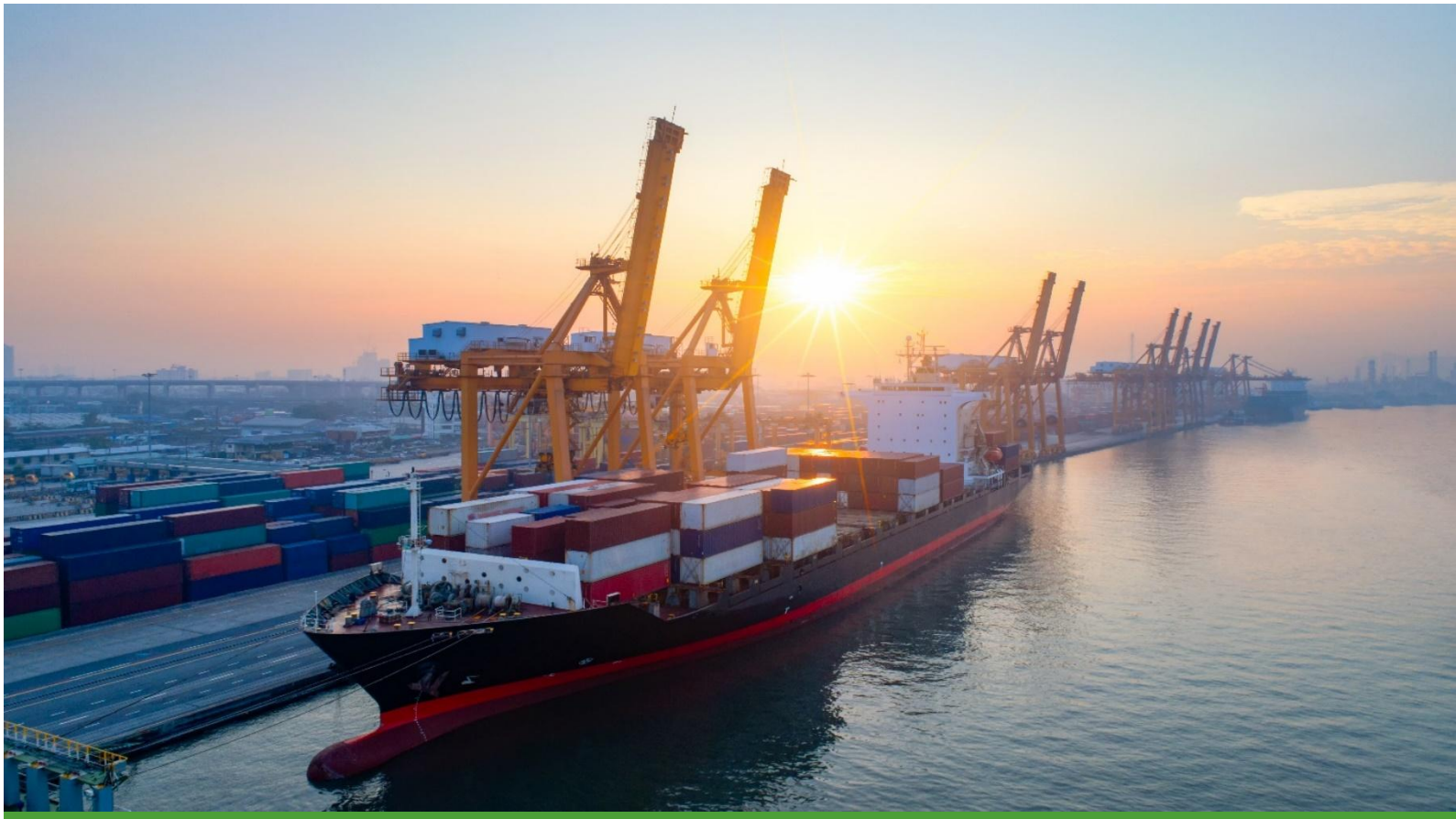
ESCAP
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

POLICY BRIEF

Advancing Gender Equality in the Maritime Transport Sector

Key Insights from the 12th Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development Side Event:

Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in the Maritime Transport Sector



Disclaimer: The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this policy brief do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. Where the designation "country or area" appears, it covers countries, territories, cities or areas. Bibliographical and other references have, wherever possible, been verified. The United Nations bears no responsibility for the availability or functioning of URLs. The opinions, figures and estimates set forth in this publication should not necessarily be considered as reflecting the views or carrying the endorsement of the United Nations. The mention of firm names and commercial products does not imply the endorsement of the United Nations.

For further information on this policy brief, please address your enquiries to:
Weimin Ren
Director, Transport Division
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)
Email: escap-td@un.org

Table of Contents

Executive Summary 4

I: BACKGROUND 5

II: INTRODUCTION 7

III. KEY CHALLENGES 9

IV: BEST PRACTICES AND REGIONAL & NATIONAL EFFORTS 10

V: POLICY RECOMENTATIONS 11

V: CONCLUSION 13

ANNEX 14

Executive Summary

The 12th Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) Side Event on Advancing Gender Equality in the Maritime Transport Sector was held on 28 February 2025. Organized by ESCAP's Transport Division, Korea Ports and Harbours Association (KPHA), the Republic of Fiji, and the Port Authority of Thailand (PAT), the event brought together policymakers, industry representatives, and international organizations to discuss strategies for increasing women's participation in the maritime sector.

The discussions focused on the challenges and opportunities for gender inclusion in maritime transport, with particular emphasis on barriers such as gender biases, underrepresentation in leadership roles, less opportunity for training, education and career development and workplace safety concerns. Best practices from national and regional initiatives were shared, highlighting policies from Republic of Korea and Thailand, as well as the efforts of the Women in Maritime Associations (WIMA) and the Pacific Women in Maritime Association (PacWIMA) to advance networking, training, and advocacy for women in the maritime industry. The International Labour Organization (ILO) emphasized the need to align national policies with international labor standards and strengthen protections for women in the workplace. ESCAP also shared insights on the status of gender equality in maritime transport in Asia and the Pacific, as well as relevant activities that can enhance regional cooperation in this topic. Challenges, including the shortage of labour in the maritime sector, were also discussed.

The event underscored the need for stronger gender-responsive policies, expanded training and leadership development opportunities, enhanced workplace protections, and increased regional and international collaboration. It also highlighted the importance of improving data collection and monitoring to better assess progress on gender inclusion across the sector.

The key recommendations from the event include:

- Strengthening gender-responsive legal frameworks and protections.
- Expanding access to education, training, and career development opportunities for women.
- Creating inclusive and safe workplace environments.
- Promoting women's leadership through mentorship and targeted recruitment.
- Enhancing regional collaboration and sharing of best practices.
- Improving gender-disaggregated data collection and use.

The event reaffirmed that gender equality in the maritime sector is not just a social goal but a strategic necessity for workforce sustainability, economic resilience, and industry innovation. Strengthening gender-inclusive maritime policies is essential to realizing the full potential of the transport sector and ensuring that no one is left behind. ESCAP and its development partners remain committed to supporting these efforts through regional dialogue, policy development, and capacity-building initiatives.

I: BACKGROUND

Maritime transport plays a vital role in enabling sustainable development and regional integration, serving as a gateway for international trade across Asia and the Pacific. In addition, this sector contributes to significant employment opportunities in the region. In fact, approximately 60 per cent of global seafarer supply came from the Asia-Pacific region in 2021 and all of the top five supplying countries are in the Asia-Pacific region[1].

Table 1. Top Five Countries in the World for Seafarer Supply

	Country	Total Seafarers	Officers	Ratings*
1	Philippines	252,393	81,090	171,303
2	Russian Federation	198,123	71,652	126,471
3	Indonesia	143,702	51,237	92,465
4	China	134,294	69,364	64,930
5	India	113,474	58,645	54,829

*non-officer crew members
Source: UNCTAD STAT based on the BIMCO-ICS Report

Despite the region's diversity, which includes coastal nations, archipelagic countries, and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), common challenges persist in advancing gender equality within the maritime transport sector. These include addressing gender imbalances in the workforce, improving access to leadership roles, and creating safe, inclusive workplaces. Improvements made in the gender equality of the transport sector will help advance SDG 5 through the inclusion of more women in the transport workforce, which will allow a broader gender perspective that will benefit everyone, not just women. In addition, women can be powerful agents of change by introducing different norms, knowledge and experiences to the development of sustainable transport strategies and policies. An increase in gender equality in the transport workforce can accelerate sustainable transport, as women often put a strong focus on addressing climate change and ensuring environmental sustainability through the adoption of sustainable solutions[2]. The improvement of gender equality is not just a social or environmental issue but will also bring economic benefits, especially since there is a growing labour shortage in the maritime transport sector[3], which can be addressed by making full use of the available labour force regardless of gender.

[1] BIMCO and International Chamber of Shipping (2021), Seafarer Workforce Report: The Global Supply and Demand for Seafarers in 2021.
[2] Pirra, Miriam, and others (2021). A preliminary analysis on gender aspects in transport systems and mobility services: presentation of a survey design. Sustainability, vol. 13, No. 5, p. gff2676.
[3] The Drewry Manning Annual Review and Forecast 2023/2024, June 2023.

The transport sector, and maritime transport in particular, has long been male dominated. While women comprise approximately 16.8 percent of the overall transport workforce, they remain significantly underrepresented in maritime roles. Globally, women make up just 1.2 percent of seafarers and only 29 percent of the broader maritime workforce, with even lower representation in technical and leadership positions. In the Pacific, women constitute only 11 percent of the maritime workforce.[4] This disparity reflects a range of structural and societal barriers, including unequal access to education and training opportunities, limited support for career advancement, workplace discrimination, and environments that are not always conducive to gender inclusion. Additionally, inadequate legal protection and the absence of policies that support work-life balance, which will benefit both women and men, and maternity needs further constrain women's participation.

Recognizing these challenges, regional and international frameworks have emphasized the importance of gender inclusion. The Regional Action Programme for Sustainable Transport Development in Asia and the Pacific (2022–2026) calls for gender-responsive transport policies and stronger institutional support to promote women's participation. Additionally, at the global level, initiatives such as the International Maritime Organization(IMO) Women in Maritime Programme and the International Labour Organization(ILO) Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) aim to strengthen workplace protections and provide opportunities for training, networking, and mentorship.

[4] BIMCO and International Chamber of Shipping, *Seafarer Workforce Report* (London: ICS, 2021).

II: INTRODUCTION

The side event on Advancing Gender Equality in the Maritime Transport Sector was held as part of the 12th Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) on 28 February 2025 at the United Nations Conference Centre in Bangkok and online. It was organized by ESCAP's Transport Division in collaboration with the Republic of Korea Ports and Harbours Association (KPHA), the Republic of Fiji, and the Port Authority of Thailand (PAT), with the aim of spotlighting regional efforts to increase women's participation in maritime transport.

The event supported the APFSD's broader objective of reviewing progress toward the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 on gender equality. As part of the annual APFSD forum, the side event served as a platform for governments, international organizations, civil society, and other stakeholders to share national strategies, highlight challenges, and discuss ways to strengthen regional cooperation.

More than 70 participants joined both in person and online, including representatives from government agencies, maritime and port authorities, the private sector, women's organizations, and regional and international institutions. Welcoming remarks were delivered by Ms. Yang Lin, Deputy Executive Secretary of ESCAP; H.E. Amena Yauvoli, Ambassador of the Republic of Fiji; and Mr. Park Seunggee, Vice President of the Korea Ports and Harbours Association. Their remarks emphasized the critical importance of inclusive maritime policies and cooperation for advancing the sustainable development agenda.

Following the opening remarks, a panel of experts and practitioners presented their experiences and perspectives on key issues affecting gender equality in the sector. The panel featured speakers from the Port Authority of Thailand; the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, Republic of Korea; Women in Maritime Association Asia (WIMA); Pacific Women in Maritime Association (PacWIMA); the International Labour Organization (ILO); and the ESCAP Transport Division. They explored workforce demands, barriers to women's participation, strategies to overcome these challenges, and the role of international cooperation in advancing equality in maritime transport.

This policy brief summarizes the key themes, discussion points, and policy recommendations presented during the event, with the aim of informing future regional dialogues and supporting the development of gender-responsive maritime transport policies.

12th APFSD Side Event: Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in the Maritime Transport Sector



Figure 1: Participants at the 12th APFSD Side Event: Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in the Maritime Transport Sector (Source: ESCAP)

III. KEY CHALLENGES

During the side event, speakers highlighted persistent challenges that continue to limit women's participation in the maritime sector. These include gender stereotypes including perception and cultural bias that influence recruitment and limit professional mobility, a lack of women in senior leadership roles and career opportunities due to difficulties in securing jobs, leadership training, and advancement, compounded by a lack of supervisory support, and workplace environments, such as poor onboard conditions that are not always conducive to women's safety or career advancement. Women seafarers often work on vessels that lack basic amenities, appropriate safety equipment, and tailored training, which hampers their ability to complete necessary education and work comfortably. The physically demanding nature of certain maritime roles, combined with outdated perceptions of gender roles, continues to exclude women from core operational and seafaring positions. However, such perceptions are increasingly less relevant as the sector becomes more automated and digitalized.

Additionally, structural barriers were also emphasized, such as unequal access to maritime training and education, limited career development pathways, and the absence of gender-responsive policies in many national regulatory frameworks. Existing policy and regulatory gaps, including fragmented gender diversity policies in the maritime industry, often lead to significant challenges in recruiting, promoting, and retaining women in both private and government sectors.

Speakers also stressed that women's contributions to maritime sustainability and innovation are often undervalued or overlooked in decision-making processes.

The speakers representing WIMA and PacWIMA underscored the isolation many women in the industry experience, especially those working in remote or island communities. The lack of mentorship opportunities and professional networks further exacerbates this challenge. Meanwhile, the ILO highlighted that gender-based violence and harassment remain widespread and underreported, often due to limited access to grievance mechanisms and weak enforcement of workplace protections. These challenges are further compounded by a lack of gender-disaggregated data, making it difficult to monitor progress or design effective, targeted interventions.

IV: BEST PRACTICES AND REGIONAL & NATIONAL EFFORTS

Encouragingly, a number of efforts across the region are already driving progress toward greater gender equality in the maritime sector. The Republic of Korea's Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries presented its "Female Seafarers Training and Employment Program," which offers training subsidies, mentorship pairing, and career placement support for female cadets and graduates. The Republic of Korea has also hosted international roundtables to exchange best practices, enhanced maternity protections for port employees, and launched public awareness campaigns to promote maritime careers to young women.

The Port Authority of Thailand shared its strategy to improve gender balance within its organization. This includes the appointment of a gender focal point within the Human Resources department, the adoption of gender-sensitive codes of conduct, and the implementation of regular training sessions on gender equality and anti-harassment policies. The Authority is also actively engaging with schools and universities through outreach programs that promote the maritime sector as a viable and rewarding career path for women.

The Women in Maritime Association Asia (WIMA) and the Pacific Women in Maritime Association (PacWIMA) highlighted how their member-led organizations have successfully elevated women's voices in policymaking and industry dialogue. WIMA Asia's leadership development programs and PacWIMA's community-based training initiatives are playing a key role in closing skills gaps and increasing women's participation in decision-making spaces across the sector.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) emphasized the importance of ratifying and implementing the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC, 2006). The organization called on governments to strengthen labor inspections, improve grievance mechanisms, and ensure that gender equality standards are embedded in maritime education, training institutions, and port operations.

The Transport Division of ESCAP also continues to advance gender equality in maritime transport across the region. Through technical assistance, regional dialogues, and analytical research, the Division supports member States in identifying and addressing gender gaps. The 2023 regional gender and maritime survey provides essential baseline data to inform evidence-based policy recommendations, particularly for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and least developed countries (LDCs) and guides ongoing efforts to mainstream gender considerations in maritime policy development. The Asia-Pacific Regional Dialogue on Sustainable Maritime Connectivity, an annual event pursuant to ESCAP Resolution 76/1 and in line with the ESCAP Regional Action Programme on Sustainable Transport Development, has also incorporated gender discussions in its maritime sector thematic session. In addition, ESCAP has also published a set of regional guidelines to support ESCAP member States develop and implement inclusive transport policies, for women in the transport workforce and women as transport users[5].

[5] ESCAP (2024). Enhancing Social Inclusion and Innovations in Urban Transport Systems in Asia-Pacific Cities.

V: POLICY RECOMENTATIONS

Building on the insights shared during the side event, the following policy recommendations aim to address existing barriers and promote gender equality in maritime transport:

- Institutionalize gender-responsive policies and legal frameworks by integrating gender equality into national maritime and transport strategies, ensuring compliance with international labor standards, and strengthening legal protections against discrimination and harassment. The embrace of diversity for improved services should be mainstreamed and organizations should prioritize gender diversity to better serve a diverse customer base and tap into a broader talent pool.
- Enhance educational and professional pathways for women by increasing access to maritime education and certification, offering targeted scholarships and apprenticeships, and developing outreach campaigns to inspire young women to pursue maritime careers.
- Promote inclusive workplace environments by implementing zero-tolerance policies for harassment, improving access to grievance and reporting mechanisms, and fostering inclusive workplace cultures through training, leadership support, and family-friendly workplace policies. Gender sensitive policies can also include setting diversity targets and creating gender sensitization initiatives to foster a supportive work environment. Organizational measures for gender sensitization include establishing monitoring systems for career trends, reassessing recruitment criteria from a gender perspective, and promoting initiatives that address work-life balance and gender stereotypes.
- Career appeal and retention of women in the sector can be enhanced by addressing workplace culture, supporting women's career advancement, progression and leadership by establishing mentorship programs, leadership training, and quotas or targets for women in senior roles. Creating national or regional databases of qualified women in maritime can also support recruitment and visibility. A targeted leadership program is recommended to fast-track women into senior roles, overcoming barriers such as the "broken rung" and "glass ceiling" and equipping them with the necessary skills and mentorship.
- Expand regional and international cooperation through networks like WIMA and PacWIMA, encouraging governments and stakeholders to collaborate on knowledge sharing, capacity building, and joint initiatives to support gender equality.
- Strengthen gender data collection and monitoring by encouraging the disaggregation of employment data by sex and rank, conducting regular assessments of gender equity in maritime roles, and using data to guide and evaluate policy.
- Support gender mainstreaming in climate and sustainability initiatives in maritime transport, recognizing women’s role in building climate resilience, especially in SIDS and coastal communities.
- Onshore and offshore roles and be further balanced. Currently, women are more prevalent in onshore administrative roles than in core maritime functions. Promoting inclusive education and technical training can help integrate more women into specialized seafaring positions.

These recommendations underscore that advancing gender equality is not only a human rights imperative but also a strategic priority for building a more resilient, skilled, economic efficient, and

sustainable maritime workforce. Effective implementation will require multisectoral collaboration, strong political will, and sustained investment in gender-inclusive approaches to transport policy and governance as the maritime transport sector continues to evolve.

V: CONCLUSION

The side event held during the 12th Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development reaffirmed the shared commitment of governments, industry leaders, civil society, and international organizations to promote gender equality in the maritime transport sector. Discussions and presentations highlighted that advancing gender inclusion is not only central to achieving sustainable development goals but also key to building a more resilient, efficient, and inclusive maritime industry.

Despite the persistent barriers faced by women in maritime professions, the side event illustrated that meaningful progress is achievable through coordinated action, knowledge exchange, and inclusive policy design. Countries across the Asia-Pacific region have demonstrated innovative and effective practices, but greater investment, collaboration, and accountability are needed to scale up these efforts and ensure that no one is left behind as countries transition to a more automated and digitalized future under increasing climate pressure.

Moving forward, regional cooperation mechanisms such as WIMA and PacWIMA, together with multilateral organizations including ESCAP and the ILO, must continue to serve as platforms for dialogue, capacity building, and shared advocacy. Strengthening institutional frameworks, fostering inclusive workplace cultures, and improving access to education and leadership opportunities will be essential to build a maritime sector that reflects the diversity and potential of the region's population.

The maritime transport sector is evolving rapidly in response to climate, technological, and demographic changes. Integrating gender perspectives into these transformations will not only improve outcomes for women and men but also contribute to broader goals of sustainable development, social equity, and economic resilience. Continued commitment and action from all stakeholders will be vital to realizing a maritime sector that is truly inclusive, forward-looking, and aligned with the values of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

ANNEX

12th APFSD Side Event: Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in the Maritime Transport Sector – Programme

Event duration: 75 minutes

Moderator: Ms. Azhar Jaimurzina Ducrest, ESCAP-Transport Division

Opening Remarks	10 min 09:00 – 09:10
• Ms. Yang Lin, Deputy Executive Secretary, ESCAP • H.E. Amena Yauvoli, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Fiji to the Republic of Indonesia; High Commissioner to Singapore; Permanent Representative to UNESCAP in Bangkok • Mr. Park Seunggee, Vice President, Korea Ports and Harbours Association, Republic of Korea	
Empowering Women in Maritime: National Strategies and Regional Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region	**60 min** **09:10 – 10:10**
Ms. Panitta Charoenphol, Deputy Director General (Human Resources Management and Corporate Governance), Port Authority of Thailand	
Mr. Choonghyun, Ryu, Deputy Director, Seafarers Policy Division, Shipping and Logistics Bureau, Ministry of Oceans and Fishery, Republic of Korea	
Ms. Merle Jimenez-San Pedro, President, Women in Maritime Association Asia (WIMA)	
Ms. Jennifer Mudge, Senior Specialist on Gender Equality, Non-Discrimination and Inclusion, International Labour Organization Decent Work Technical Support Team, Bangkok	
Ms. Meliame Tu'alau, Chairperson of Pacific Women in Maritime Association (PacWIMA, Virtual)	
Ms. Wei-Shiuen Ng, Economic Affairs Officer, Gender Focal Point, Transport Division, ESCAP	
Closing/Summary of Discussion	**5 min** **10:10 – 10:15**

For information, please contact Mr. Alex Macias, ESCAP-Transport Division, at Alejandro.macias@un.org.

Transport Division

ESCAP
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

Follow us:

unescap
unitednationsescap
united-nations-escap
unescap.org