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GENDERING THE INDO-PACIFIC CONVERSATION

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INDO PACIFIC PROGRAM

ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

This article explores the multifaceted landscape of gender-related challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, while highlighting the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This comprehensive analysis scrutinises critical gender issues and the influence of gender discussions on policy making throughout the Indo-Pacific. The article also highlights the differences between the Indo-Pacific and the European Union in addressing these issues as well as their respective challenges and solutions. It delves into the root causes of gender disparities, and unpacks initiatives and progress being made in the region to advance gender equality. Ultimately, this article provides a holistic overview of gender dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, taking into account the unique challenges posed by the pandemic.

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The Indo-Pacific region holds immense strategic importance due to the presence of economic powerhouses like India, China, and the United States (Hakata and Cannon 3). However, the region grapples with critical gender issues, including disparities in economic opportunities and political representation. While much of the discourse surrounding the Indo-Pacific focuses on maritime geopolitics, security, trade, and environmental activities (Michel and Passarelli), it is vital to recognise the far-reaching impact of gender dynamics on the region's social, political, and economic landscapes. Adding to this is the importance of underscoring specific instances exemplifying the multifaceted nature of gender dynamics; recognising the intricate intersections of gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic factors unveils the nuanced challenges faced by women across diverse backgrounds. This also sheds light on the hurdles and opportunities for fostering gender equality in this dynamic region.

The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023 assesses gender disparities in the Indo-Pacific, covering economic participation, education, health, and political empowerment (World Economic Forum 5). Japan, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan have lower economic participation rankings, while Bangladesh, China, and Pakistan lag in education. India, Vietnam, and China rank lowest in health, and Brunei, Malaysia, and Japan face political representation challenges (World Economic Forum 17).

The female labour force participation rate serves as a critical indicator of gender disparities in the Indo-Pacific, reflecting the region's diverse economic and cultural landscapes. Despite varying economic development levels, common challenges persist, including gender bias, segmentation in both formal and informal sectors, and the burden of unpaid care work, limiting women's engagement in formal employment. Moreover, a lack of care-related policies worsens gender disparities (UN ESCAP, "Financing an Inclusive and Green Future" 1). In contrast, the European Union's policies promoting work-life balance, equal pay for equal work, and women's representation in leadership positions have led to higher gender parity in labour force participation in Europe (Villosio et al.).

Gender-related issues in the Indo-Pacific are deeply rooted in cultural norms and traditional gender roles, which hinder women's access to education, employment, and political participation. These norms also contribute to harmful practices like child marriage and female genital mutilation (UNICEF). Many Indo-Pacific countries uphold conservative perspectives and traditional gender norms, slowing government efforts to reduce the gender gap. For instance, in Japan, women are often expected to prioritise family responsibilities over careers or leadership positions (Cho et al).

Furthermore, conservative viewpoints manifest in the suppression and

marginalisation of women's voices in both public and private spheres. Some countries, like China, employ strict censorship to suppress feminist movements and gender equality discussions (Bao). Similarly, feminists in Korea face online harassment, stifling open debate (Kim; Kim and Choi).

Gender economic disparities in the Indo-Pacific are primarily due to limited market access, financial constraints, a lack of relevant education and skills training, and discriminatory laws and regulations that collectively restrict women's economic independence (Asian Development Bank and The Asia Foundation 5-11). Unequal pay for similar work persists, and the informal sector absorbs a substantial portion of female labour, intensifying economic vulnerability (ASEAN and UN Women).

In the Indo-Pacific region, intersectionality also plays a crucial role. Intersectionality highlights the complex interplay of gender, race, class, and sexuality, resulting in overlapping systems of discrimination and disadvantage (Crenshaw; Collins 2). Ethnic minority women often experience multiple layers of discrimination due to their gender and ethnic background, leading to barriers in education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, as well as higher rates of violence and discrimination. The Indo-Pacific region encompasses diverse ethnic and cultural groups, with the different regions within Asia alone, each with distinct cultural practices that create

unique challenges for women based on their ethnicity.

Efforts have been made in some Indo-Pacific countries to enhance women's access to education and reduce gender disparities. For instance, initiatives in Bangladesh and India aim to boost girls' enrolment in schools and promote gender equality in education (Ahmed et al.; Chowdhury et al.; Shafiq; Asadullah and Chaudhury; Chaudhury and Sinha). Similarly, Indonesia and Vietnam have taken steps to improve girls' education and promote gender parity in schools (Zulkarnaini and Adriany; Karimah and Susanti; Yen and Hoang).

However, significant disparities based on ethnicity persist, particularly in conflict-affected regions like Myanmar and Pakistan, where women from ethnic minority backgrounds lack access to education and opportunities in the informal and domestic economy due to multiple armed conflicts and underinvestment in welfare provisioning (Belak; Hedström; Hedström and Olivius; Ali; Khan).

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly exacerbated gender disparities in the Indo-Pacific region, with women bearing disproportionate economic, educational, and health costs (World Economic Forum; Newman et al. 1-25). Economic disruptions caused by lockdowns and restrictions disproportionately affect sectors with high female employment,

resulting in job losses and reduced working hours, making women more economically vulnerable (World Economic Forum). The closure of schools and day-care centres increased women's unpaid care work responsibilities, limiting their ability to engage in formal employment (United Nations, "The Impact of COVID-19" 13-16). Moreover, as remote work and online education became the norm, the digital divide became apparent, with women and girls in rural and marginalised communities facing barriers to technology and online learning opportunities (United Nations, "The Impact of COVID-19" 8-17).

The pandemic has raised awareness of gender disparities in the Indo-Pacific, emphasising women's disproportionate impact in terms of health outcomes and economic consequences. Gender discussions have played a crucial role in bringing to light these disparities, compelling governments to recognise the importance of gender equality in pandemic response and recovery efforts (UN Women). Furthermore, these discussions have pushed for legal reforms to protect women's rights and promote gender equity in the Indo-Pacific (UNDP). Another significant impact of these discussions has been the empowerment of women in the region, with women increasingly recognised as vital contributors to the region's recovery efforts and agents of change in dismantling gender inequalities, beginning from within their respective communities and working up front here.

It is crucial to highlight specific instances that exemplify the multifaceted nature of gender dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, and recognise the intricate intersections of gender, ethnicity, and a long list of socio-economic factors illuminating the nuanced challenges faced by women across diverse backgrounds. The complex impact of the COVID-19 pandemic further highlights the challenges and opportunities for fostering gender equality in this region.

INFLUENCE ON POLICY MAKING

Gender discussions in the Indo-Pacific region have had a profound impact on policy-making, leading to the implementation of laws and regulations, increased financial commitments, and the promotion of women's leadership roles. International agreements like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) have served as a foundation for addressing gender disparities. Legal reforms aimed at advancing gender equality are a prominent outcome, with countries like Timor-Leste and Vietnam enacting general legislation to promote gender equality and women's political participation (True et al. 3). This legal reform signifies a broader regional commitment to bridging gender gaps in political and social arenas.

Gender mainstreaming, introduced at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, has been adopted globally, emphasising the integration of

gender issues into development efforts, increased accountability to women, and the elimination of institutional biases affecting women's rights (United Nations, "Gender Mainstreaming"). This approach has been adopted by countries like Indonesia, Taiwan, China, and Mongolia, which have integrated gender mainstreaming into their national policies and established mechanisms for CEDAW monitoring and reporting (True et al. 3; United Nations, "Gender Mainstreaming").

Financial commitments in the Indo-Pacific region also incorporate gender-sensitive strategies, including earmarking specific funds for women's economic empowerment programs and integrating gender considerations into budgeting processes (Wong). India and Bangladesh have recognised the importance of gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) for promoting gender equality (Khalifa and Scarparo). However, it is crucial to address potential challenges, such as the influence of populist measures on gender budgeting in India (Nolte et al.).

Regional organisations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have consistently committed to gender equality and women's empowerment, emphasising women's participation in various spheres, democracy, human rights, and violence prevention. Gender mainstreaming is institutionalised within these organisations, integrating gender perspectives into all policy domains and

decision-making processes (Alami).

Challenges persist, particularly regarding women's representation in parliamentary bodies across most ASEAN countries, which remains disappointingly low (Bangun). Practical implementation of ASEAN's commitments faces obstacles, notably concerning female migrants who often lack institutionalised protection (Häbel et al.). It is crucial to ensure normative coherence for development within gender equality initiatives in the ASEAN Economic Community (Häbel et al.).

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) also represents an organisation that has integrated gender mainstreaming into its development strategy, recognising gender equality as essential for sustainable development. Guided by its Policy on Gender and Development (GAD), ADB uses gender mainstreaming across its operations, from strategy formulation to project implementation. ADB aims to incorporate gender-inclusive designs in at least 75% of its operations by 2030 (ADB). An example of ADB's commitment is seen in projects like the Additional Skills Acquisition Programme in Kerala, India, which focuses on integrating women into educational, economic, and political spheres (Nimi et al.).

Macroeconomic factors significantly influence gender inequality in Indo-Pacific countries. Economic growth, trade, and foreign direct investment (FDI) have a substantial impact on the gender

inequality index (Sangaji et al.). Regional trade cooperation initiatives, such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC), have emphasised mainstreaming gender equality into cooperation and trade policies (True; Frohmann). The interplay between immigration and trade policies also plays a significant role, suggesting that addressing gender inequality in immigration policies can have implications for trade (Ekakkararunroj et al.).

Institutional policies are critical for supporting economic growth and addressing macroeconomic conditions in gender equality efforts (Nguyen et al.). Challenges arise in the relationship between gender inequality and FDI, where some countries use wage discrimination to attract FDI, contradicting gender equality goals (Bui et al.). Challenges also emerge regarding wage discrimination against women in concentrated industries, conflicting with neoclassical economic theory (Berik et al.). However, research by Wolszczak-Derlacz (449) suggests that trade openness can reduce the gender wage gap in concentrated industries, aligning with neoclassical economic tenets, offering hope for reducing discrimination.

Efforts to address gender inequality in foreign trade policies have also found common ground. APEC consistently works towards mainstreaming gender equality into its cooperation and trade policies, incorporating gender provisions in agreements and introducing a gender perspective into general trade rules and export sector support instruments (True).

This underscores APEC's commitment to promoting gender equality in the Indo-Pacific.

Development partnerships expand beyond just acknowledgment of gender disparities. They involve strategic initiatives like gender budgeting, capacity building, and policy advocacy, as demonstrated by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific's (UNESCAP) Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy (UNESCAP, "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Asia and the Pacific"). In foreign policy, the integration of gender considerations has gained more recognition. The UN's Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and initiatives like ASEAN's Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, illustrate efforts to make policy outcomes more inclusive and responsive to societal needs (UNDP; ASEAN, "Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in the ASEAN Region").

Civil society organisations (CSOs) play an equally critical role in advocating for gender equality and influencing policy making. Their involvement varies across the Indo-Pacific, with some countries exhibiting notable civil society inclusion, while others remain more closed off. ASEAN's engagement with civil society through platforms like the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN People's Forum (ACSC/APF) reflects a positive trend towards inclusive policymaking

(ACSC/APF). Japan, another major player in the Indo-Pacific, has incorporated civil society inputs in its development cooperation frameworks. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) collaborates with NGOs in various countries in the Indo-Pacific region for projects focusing on gender equality and women's empowerment (JICA, "Asia").

Within the Indo-Pacific region, progress in embedding gender perspectives into policy making efforts is notable but still largely uneven, highlighting the need for more unified and thorough approaches. Strong frameworks in some countries can serve as models for others, underscoring the importance of collaboration between organisations, governments, and civil societies. This cooperation is crucial to making gender considerations a core element of development strategies and foreign policies, accurately representing the region's diverse needs and dynamics.

COMPARISON TO THE EU

The comparison of the Indo-Pacific region with the European Union (EU) reveals distinct disparities and achievements in the realm of gender equality and policymaking. In assessing these two geographical entities, it becomes evident that while significant strides have been taken (although much more still needs to be done) to promote gender equality in the Indo-Pacific, there remain areas in need of improvement. The EU stands as a notable exemplar with its higher representation of women in political and leadership roles, a factor instrumental in shaping more

comprehensive gender policies and legislation (EIGE). Notably, the EU's Gender Equality Strategy for 2020-2025 serves as a pivotal benchmark for the Indo-Pacific, as it encompasses diverse policy domains and sectors, underscoring the EU's unwavering commitment to addressing gender disparities comprehensively (EIGE).

Moreover, the EU has forged a robust framework for gender mainstreaming, ensuring the seamless integration of gender perspectives into all policies and actions. This approach bolsters policy coherence and fosters a unified stance across member states (EIGE). In the domain of maternity and paternity leave policies, EU member states, by and large, offer more expansive and supportive measures than many Indo-Pacific nations. This affords greater encouragement for the equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities and augments gender equality within the labour market (EIGE).

CONCLUSION

In recent decades, the Indo-Pacific region has shown significant progress in addressing gender disparities, further accelerated by the challenges posed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, it lags behind the European Union (EU) in terms of political representation and the implementation of comprehensive gender policies, with the EU's Gender Equality Strategy serving as an exemplary model (EIGE). To challenge deeply ingrained cultural norms and traditional gender roles at the heart of

these disparities, the region must continue its commitment. This is essential not only for individual women but also for the region's overall advancement and prosperity (Makunya; Jokela-Pansini).

The Indo-Pacific has leveraged various mechanisms, such as international treaties (e.g., CEDAW), civil society movements, pro-women institutions, and transnational activism, fostering constructive dialogue and national networks (Stark and Ager). Feminist mobilisation in civil society has led to progressive policies and combating violence against women (Htun and Weldon). In addition, legislative reforms in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in Muslim-majority countries, aim to promote gender equality and women's rights within the context of family laws (Sezgin). This shows the significant role of both international and domestic institutions in shaping reproductive health policies and in the broader promotion of gender equality through the implementation of international law (Bekyashev and Sheremet).

The Indo-Pacific has evolved into a focal point for discourse on stability, openness, and freedom, embodying strategic interests alongside foundational values such as human rights and gender equality (Gaens & Sinkkonen, 269). Concerted efforts, at both national and regional levels, need to be undertaken to formulate and implement gender-sensitive policies across all thematic areas of regional cooperation.

Several gender-sensitive initiatives that have already made headway in the region—which include policies addressing public health, climate change, and economic responses to crises—demonstrate a growing awareness of gender dynamics in policy formulation (Patel et al.; Mohapatra). As previously mentioned, APEC also serves as a prime example of integrating gender equality into trade and cooperation policies (True), while specific policies like the Digital Energy of Asia have been pivotal in empowering marginalised groups, particularly women (Enggarratri, 2021). Furthermore, ASEAN's commitment to protecting the rights of women and minorities—evidenced by its establishment of the Intergovernmental Human Rights Commission and the Protection of Women and Children Commission—highlights the region's dedication to these issues (Wahyuningrum; Pisanò).

The Indo-Pacific's journey toward gender equality is an ongoing process. By drawing from international treaties, civil society activism, and pro-women institutions, the region can bridge the gender gap with the EU, fostering a more equitable and inclusive future; one that places women (and potentially other gender and sexual minorities) at the centre of people-centred policy making. This approach is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for ensuring a truly free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

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