

5. Concluding remarks

While some progress has been made in past decades in advancing gender equality, it remains pervasive throughout the labour markets of the region. Gender inequalities are not only rooted in the socio-cultural norms of countries but also entrenched in the policy and institutional frameworks that shape the employment opportunities of Asia's female labour force of 734 million.

The report shows that despite robust economic growth in the region between 2000 and 2007, gender gaps persisted in the labour market in terms of labour utilization and where and how women and men worked. The vast potential of women remained untapped – including gender gaps in economic activity, concentration of women in low-productivity agricultural employment, and female predominance in vulnerable and low-paid informal jobs. Gender differentials also extended to the opportunities for mobilizing and organizing, and the ways in which women's and men's role were coordinated and protected through policies. In developing Asia, women made up the “buffer workforce” – both within labour markets and as flexible and expanded workers, concentrated in informal jobs and within household as “secondary earners”.

When the global economic and financial crisis struck in 2008-2009 large numbers of women shouldered the brunt of the impacts. This is because they were already vulnerable and marginalized in the labour market before the crisis, and due to their reproductive responsibilities they were also responsible for household adjustment and coping strategies. They were hit by the first-round impact in terms of job-losses in export-oriented industries, unemployment and underemployment, and the knock-on effects on informal employment. They were also disproportionately affected by the second-round impacts on intra-households dynamics and coping strategies. Also, the crisis revealed that the informal sector's resilience to downturns is a myth and that women themselves have no safety-nets to rely on. Women migrant workers were less affected by job losses but the crisis exposed their vulnerability to discrimination, exploitation and abuse.

While Asia is now leading the world in economic recovery, the report cautions that this is not being matched by similar labour market recovery. Conditions have improved, but the recovery is still fragile for most workers, and especially for informal women workers their vulnerabilities are far from over. What is more, unemployment rates do not tell the whole story; the quality of jobs, particularly for women, remains a major concern. And despite robust economic rebound, they face the risk of persistent vulnerability, poverty and exploitation.

Measures that aim to support a sustainable and balanced economic recovery must take into account of gender issues if they are to achieve their goals. We cannot have balanced and sustainable growth without gender equality. This report argues that there is a window of opportunity to address systematic gender inequalities as well as symptoms thrown up by the crisis, to achieve full labour market recovery and successful rebalancing, underpinned by inclusive growth and the promotion of decent work.

The report identifies a set of gender-responsive policies that could help ensure that future development in the region is just, sustainable, inclusive and adequately and equitably provides decent work for all women and men in the region. Such re-balancing policies include gender-focused approach to support women entrepreneurs to establish formal enterprises, assist women engaged in agriculture to boost rural productivity and incomes, promote equal opportunities for girls and women to access quality education and training, and help to reduce the overreliance of developing Asia on the informal sector to absorb its workforce during economic recessions.

In essence, promoting gender equality in labour markets not only makes sense but it is also a “smart” policy. The exclusion of women in the workplace and their widespread employment in precarious and vulnerable jobs represent a vast economic and competitive loss for any society. Moreover, creating an enabling environment of equal opportunity and treatment in the labour market for both women and men, would also contribute tremendously to poverty reduction, the achievement of the MDGs and social justice.