

# Women in Asia and the Pacific: Challenges and Priorities



*Asia-Pacific should be a region  
where women and girls can live  
free from poverty, free from violence  
and free from discrimination...  
where women take their rightful place  
as equal participants in all spheres of life.*



Noeleen Heyzer  
Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and  
Executive Secretary of ESCAP



## Progress and Challenges: Moving Forward

Since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995, there has been progress in some areas towards achieving gender equality in the Asian and Pacific region. Educational opportunities have improved for many girls, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has been adopted by almost all States. The number of laws and national action plans to combat violence against women has been growing and there is wide acceptance that gender-sensitive policymaking is not only crucial to development but also “smart economics”.

Despite the progress made, however, women in the region continue to face discrimination and persistent constraints to achieving gender equality and empowerment. Among others, these include interrelated concerns pertaining to health, including lack of access to essential and reproductive health-care services; pervasive violence against women in many forms throughout the region, including human trafficking, particularly in women and girls; women’s predominance in vulnerable employment and the informal sector, where they are subject to precarious and insecure working conditions and low wages; women’s low level of representation in politics and decision-making positions; and an ageing society where older women, especially the poor and disabled, lack social protection.

*Note:* This data sheet is a special edition of the *Population Data Sheet* series in commemoration of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action in 2010. The data sheet may be accessed from the website [www.unescap.org](http://www.unescap.org)

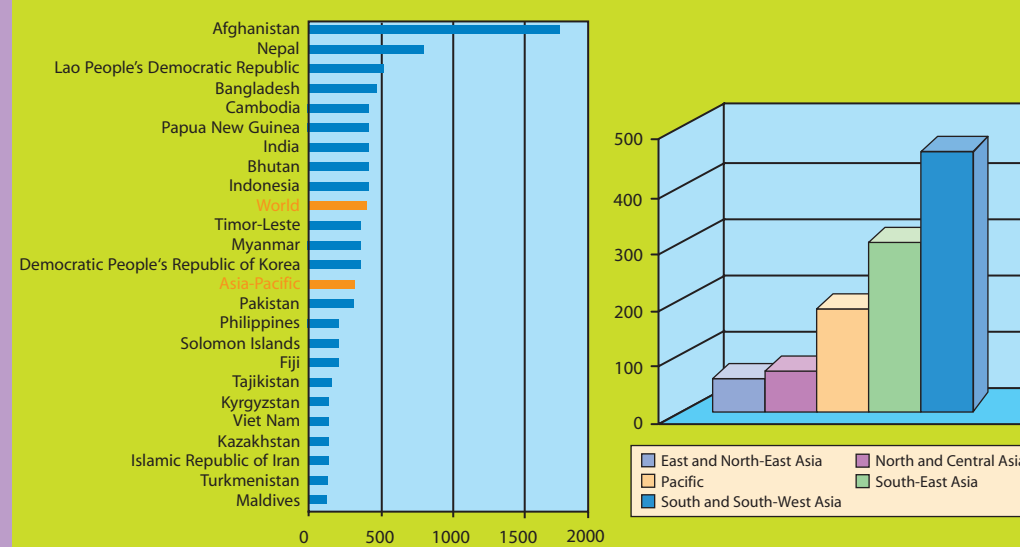
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## Many women die every day from childbirth and pregnancy-related complications

Maternal mortality ratios (deaths per 100,000 live births), 2005



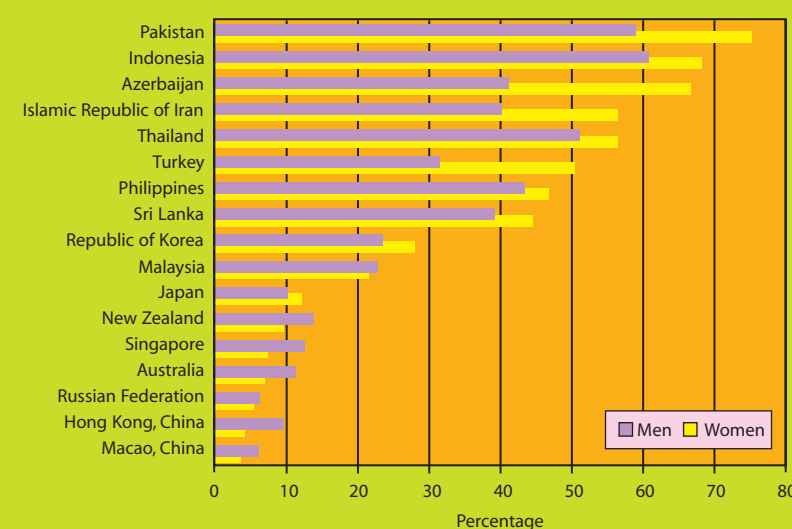
Sources: ESCAP, *Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific 2008 and 2009*, United Nations publication (Sales No. E.09.II.F.1) and United Nations publication (Sales No. E.10.II.F.1), respectively.

Maternal mortality is a serious concern in a region where about a quarter of a million women die each year and many are left chronically ill or disabled. The situation is especially alarming in South and South-West Asia, which accounts for one third of the world’s maternal deaths. Although the situation varies from country to country, common problems that contribute to maternal death include gender-based discrimination in access to reproductive health services, lack of emergency obstetric care and shortage of skilled personnel, especially at the community level.

Ensure that pregnant women have access to skilled birth attendants, pre-natal and post-natal care and quality reproductive health and family planning services.

## Women are more likely to be engaged in vulnerable employment

Percentage of employed persons in vulnerable employment, 2007



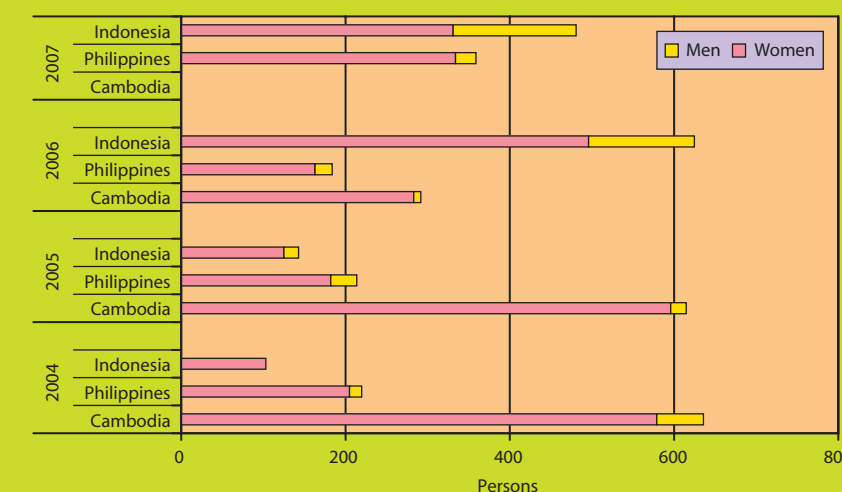
Source: ESCAP, *Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific 2009*, United Nations publication (Sales No. E.10.II.F.1)

Advances in education for girls and women have not necessarily been translated into greater economic opportunities. A large percentage of women who are self-employed or contribute to family-owned enterprises are often in situations of “vulnerable employment” characterized by inadequate earnings, lack of social protection, low productivity and difficult work conditions. Except in some of the region’s more developed economies, women workers are more likely than men to be in such vulnerable employment.

Eliminate discrimination against women in the labour market and enable them to compete by ensuring equal access to education, credit and social protection schemes.

## Women and girls are vulnerable to trafficking often for sexual exploitation and forced labour

Trafficked victims identified by national authorities, 2004-2007<sup>1</sup>



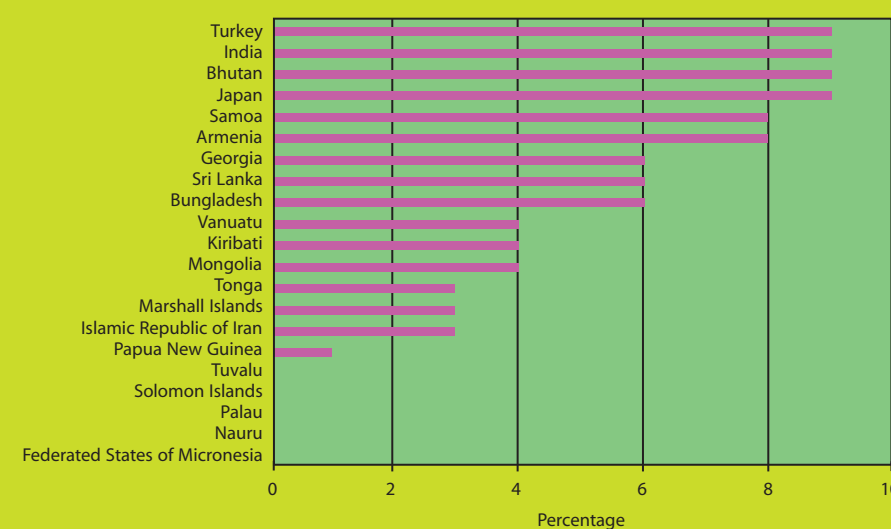
Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, 2009*.  
<sup>1</sup> Shows only the few select countries that reported sex-disaggregated data to UNODC.

An increasing number of women and girls are being trafficked within and between regions and States often for the purposes of forced labour and sexual exploitation. In the Pacific subregion and a number of Asian countries, women are more commonly trafficked than children. However, trafficking in minors is a more significant issue in other areas, including the Greater Mekong Subregion. People who are trafficked victims are often subject to multiple forms of discrimination and violence.

Devise, enforce and strengthen effective gender- and age-sensitive measures to eliminate all forms of trafficking in persons, particularly women and girls, as part of a comprehensive anti-trafficking national action plan.

## Women's political representation remains low

Women in national parliaments, single or lower house, 2009



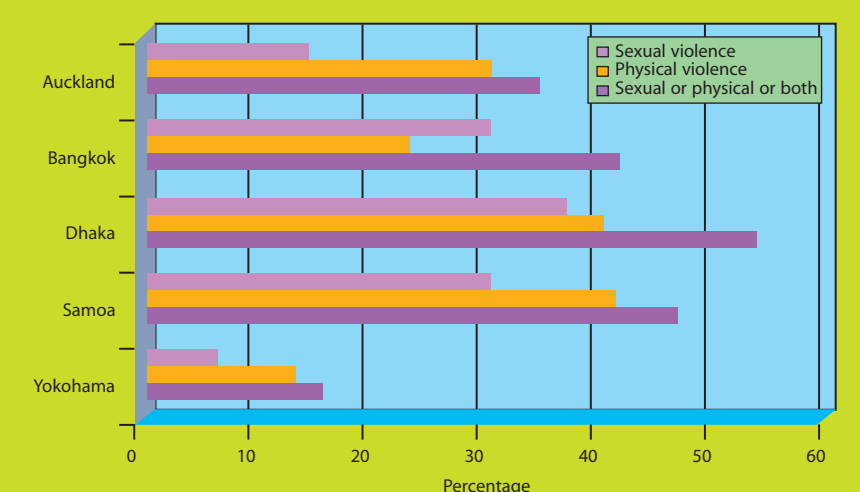
Source: ESCAP, *Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific 2009*, United Nations publication (Sales No. E.10.F.II.1).

Women represent more than half of the world’s population and constitute at least half of the voting public; yet, their political participation is still insignificant. While progress has been made over time in some countries of Asia and the Pacific, women occupy less than 10 per cent of the seats in national parliaments in one third of the countries of the region. Only two countries (New Zealand and Nepal) have reached the “critical mass” of 30 per cent female representation in key decision-making positions.

Establish measures to guarantee gender balance in governmental bodies and in the judiciary. Promote the equal rights of women and men to engage in political activities.

## Many women are subjected to different forms of violence

Percentage of women who have ever experienced violence by an intimate partner<sup>1</sup>



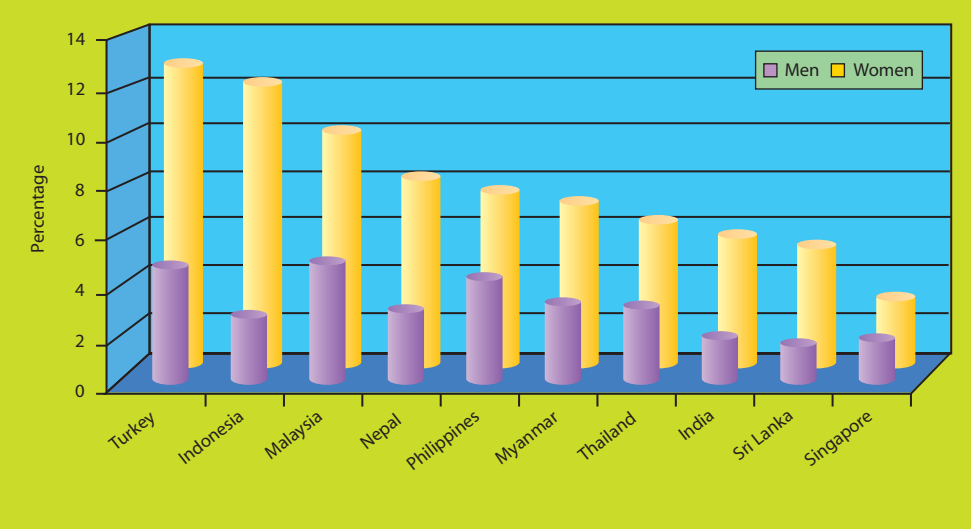
Source: World Health Organization (WHO), *Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women* (Geneva, WHO, 2005).  
<sup>1</sup> WHO collected data between 2000 and 2003.

Violence against women is pervasive throughout the region in many forms, including domestic violence, rape, harmful traditional and customary practices, dowry and “honour” killings, trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of women and girls. It constitutes one of the most widespread violations of human rights. In addition to being a major cause of death, disability and trauma, violence also has many other far-reaching consequences. These include harming families and communities, hampering productivity and undermining economic growth.

Adopt and enforce national laws and implement plans of action to address and punish all forms of violence against women and girls. Enhance national capacity and establish systems for data collection to monitor violence against women.

## Older women living alone are at greater risk of social isolation and economic deprivation

Percentage of older persons (60+) who are living alone, 2007



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Population Ageing 2007* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.07.XIII.5).

In the Asia-Pacific region, the proportion of women in the older population (60 years and over) is higher than men. More older women than older men live alone. Older persons living alone, particularly poor women, are at a greater risk of isolation and are more likely to need outside economic assistance to meet their basic needs, especially in case of illness or disability.

Develop gender-sensitive policies and national action plans to ensure the social and economic well-being of older persons, particularly women, including adequate social protection.

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