



Asia-Pacific
Economic Cooperation



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HIGHLIGHTS FROM APEC WOMEN @WORK



Why Focus on Women in the Workforce?

Economies grow faster when women work, yet globally there are 700 million fewer women than men in formal employment and women face inequalities and barriers to their labor force participation throughout the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) region. It is estimated that by eliminating barriers that prevent women from working in certain sectors or occupations we can increase labor productivity by 25 percent in some economies around the world (World Bank Group 2018). Within East and Southeast Asia, research shows that identical roles in the labor market for women and men would equate to a 30 percent increase in GDP (McKinsey 2015).

Policies and regulations can either serve as barriers to employment opportunities for women or help to ensure that women are able to access the same employment opportunities as men by mitigating obstacles and imbalances. This brief specifically examines how laws and regulations limit or enable women to enter, remain, and advance in the formal sector workforce in the APEC region, with an emphasis on access to wage employment and retention. The brief analyzes how employment and pay discrimination, regulatory employment restrictions, occupational standards, and sexual harassment can limit women's wage employment. It also examines how laws and policies can support working women and working parents to actively thrive and advance in the workplace, and highlights promising approaches and good practices to promote women's labor force participation from both the public and private sectors. The brief also features strategic recommendations that can be adopted through APEC's Economic Committee's (EC) structural reform agenda, as well as at the economy level, to improve women's labor force participation and accelerate economic growth across the Asia-Pacific region.

The Connection to Structural Reform in APEC

Since 2004, APEC has prioritized structural reforms to address barriers to trade and investment and to promote more inclusive and sustainable growth. In this APEC context, inclusive growth is achieved when the benefits of economic growth are realized by *all* individuals within APEC economies, including particularly rural or indigenous populations, women, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). This brief links directly to the priorities of the Economic Committee. APEC's recent structural reform agenda was established through the Economic Committee's APEC New Strategy for Structural Reform (ANSSR) in 2010 and later updated with the 2016 Renewed APEC Agenda for Structural Reform (RAASR), which drives APEC's structural reform work through 2020. Of RAASR's three goals, two focus on deeper participation in those markets by all segments of society, including women, as well as sustainable, non-discriminatory social policies to promote economic efficiency. Additionally, many of the topics examined link strongly to the second approach, focused on pro-inclusion structural reforms, in the *APEC Structural Reforms for Inclusive Growth: Three Approaches*. Finally, this brief ties to the *10 Structural Reform Priorities and Gaps to Fill*, in which the ninth priority focuses on structural barriers inhibiting women from participating in the workforce.

Methodology

The focus areas of this brief are drawn from the *APEC Women and the Economy Dashboard*, which includes 25 indicators addressing structural reform-related laws, policies, and regulations relating to women's employment. The findings in this brief are based on an extensive review of the literature from online academic, peer-reviewed journals; economic laws and policies; international conventions; and studies and reports from governmental, international, civil society, and research organizations. The research draws from the APEC Women and the Economy Dashboard, which includes many indicators from the World Bank Group's *Women, Business, and the Law*; economy-level and regional studies; and research for donors.

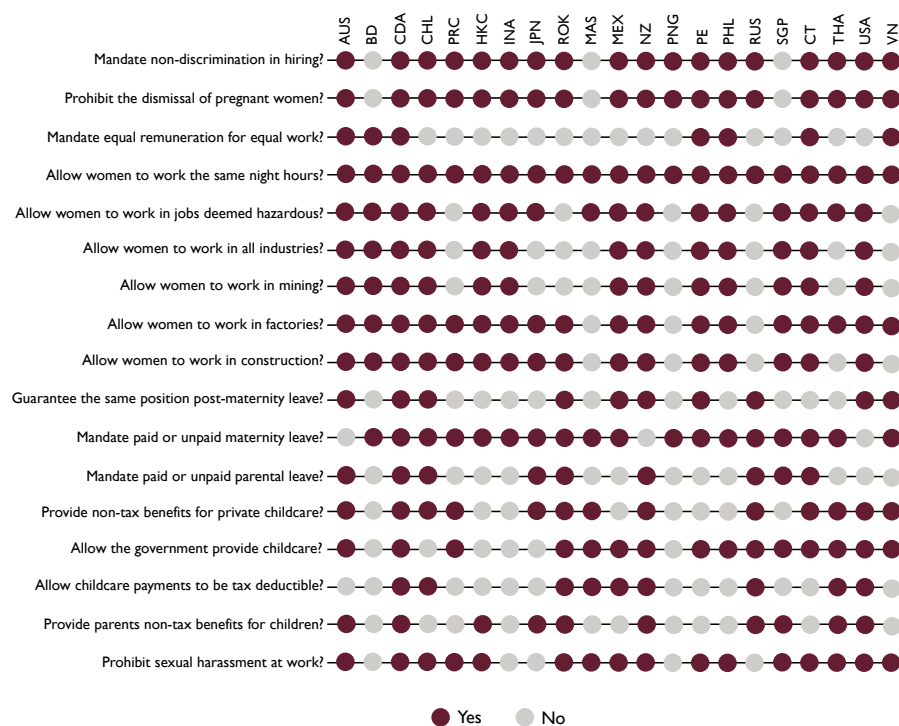
A Snapshot of Findings

The brief has two primary components for the research: (i) access to wage employment, which looks at how women are able to obtain a job, and (ii) retention of current women employees, which examines policies that provide an enabling environment for women to work. Under these two categories, the research explores sub-categories, including non-discrimination, equal pay for equal work, employment restrictions, occupational standards, post-maternity leave return to work, enabling parents to work, and workplace harassment.

To varying degrees, women in all APEC economies may face structural and regulatory barriers that limit the success of their careers. As seen below, there are a number of examples where economies have policies and regulations that do not allow men and women the same opportunities. For instance, in all 21 APEC economies, women are allowed to work the same hours as men, including evening and overnight shifts. In other areas, such as guaranteeing women the same position after maternity leave, APEC economies have room for improvement.

VISUALIZING WOMEN@WORK IN APEC

Insights from the APEC Women and the Economy Dashboard, supplemented by the World Bank's Women, Business, and the Law



Source: The information contained in this graphic is largely drawn from the APEC Women and the Economy Dashboard. Where more updated information is available, data utilized is from the World Bank Women, Business, and the Law's 2019 dataset.

The brief also provides case studies on how different economies are utilizing structural reform measures on these issues. For example, economies use varying policy models to provide childcare incentives for working parents or have occupation-specific licensing programs for women to build credibility and overcome regulatory barriers to entry. In addition, the research demonstrates the important role of private sector employers, which can join with the public sector to assist in designing and implementing workforce-based policy changes.

Recommendations and Next Steps

To guide APEC's work on these issues, the brief provides a number of recommendations at the fora and at the economy level, covering areas of further research, policy reforms, private sector engagement, investment, and implementation.

- **Quantify the impact of reforms to better equip policymakers in advocating for change.** Develop an economic impact study to demonstrate the economic benefits of implementing inclusive structural reforms to promote women's full labor market participation.
- **Focus the 2020 APEC Economic Policy Report on structural reforms that promote women's economic participation.** As these structural barriers are a key impediment to broader economic growth, greater attention to and emphasis on these issues is warranted by officials with responsibility for working on regulatory, policy, and legal reforms.
- **Track progress by systematically documenting future inclusive reforms.** The EC may work with the PPWE to develop and institutionalize a mechanism for documenting reforms, which could be institutionalized within the APEC Policy Support Unit.
- **Establish an APEC initiative on reforming and improving tax policies.** APEC can examine the effects of using tax policy to incentivize the private sector to provide childcare and reduce discriminatory practices in hiring and promotion.
- **Provide technical assistance to strengthen childcare policies across the region.** Technical assistance between APEC economies may encompass areas such as childcare standards, tax incentives, and implementation mechanisms.
- **Exchange good practices and lessons learned to facilitate economy-level actions.** Host a dialogue to exchange information on some of the good practices detailed in this brief and better understand how to improve legal and regulatory frameworks, policies, and programs.
- **Work with the APEC Business Advisory Council (ABAC)** to facilitate greater dialogue with the private sector on how the government can support companies in tackling women's labor market issues.
- **Develop a regional guidance document** on different ways to engage women's perspectives and insights in the development and revision of new or existing labor-related policies, laws, and regulations.
- **Use a pilot pathfinder approach to assess implementation of regulations that enable women's workforce participation,** including around non-discrimination, workplace sexual harassment, and returning to work after maternity leave.

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