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Gender inequality costs Asia \$47 billion annually

Gender inequality in Asia exerts a substantial economic drag, according to the International Labor Organization. Improved education, job training is needed.



Chinese women work at a food production factory in Changzhi, western China's Shanxi province, in this 2008 file photo.

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By Simon Montlake, *Correspondent* / May 9, 2011

Bangkok, Thailand

Not everyone in Asia-Pacific is benefiting from the region's robust economic growth, among them women stuck in low-wage jobs in farming or services who are usually the first to be laid off, say labor experts.

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The result is a gap in employment rates between men and women that exerts a substantial economic drag. In a new report, the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates the total cost across Asia at \$47 billion a year, based on the fact that 45 percent of working-age women in Asia are inactive or outside the labor force, compared to 19 percent of men.

Many counties in the region fare poorly on gender equality, notably in South Asia, though gender biases exist in all labor markets, say ILO officials. Even in countries like Vietnam and Thailand where many women do work outside the home, they face barriers to finding secure jobs with decent benefits, while still being expected to run a household.

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The ILO report, which was carried out together with the Asian Development Bank, argues that this gender gap can be closed provided governments adopt the right policies. It calls for the promotion of female education, more help for women working in farming, and support for female entrepreneurship.

"It's about changing the perception of what is the role of women in society, what is role of women in business," says Gyorgy Sziraczki, a senior economist for the ILO in Bangkok.

Changing that perception is integral to ensuring future economic growth. The International Monetary Fund, in its twice-yearly report, recently projected that regional economic growth in Asia-Pacific, led by China and India, was poised to grow 7 percent this year.

Asia's total female workforce stands at 734 million. Of this, only 1 percent of female workers are formally registered

as business owners, though many more run informal enterprises, such as food vending, or go to work in factories and service industries. However, most occupy lower rungs of these industries compared to male workers.

While most Asian economies took a hit in 2008 to 2009 when the US and other developed countries went into recession, they have since made strong recoveries. The ILO says that conditions for workers have improved as hiring has picked up, though it warns that the recovery is still fragile, particularly for casual laborers.

The overall unemployment rate for women is 4.3 percent, compared with 4.7 percent for men. Experts say this figure is somewhat misleading, as workers don't bother to register as unemployed in countries that lack social safety nets. "People can't afford to be unemployed," says Mr. Sziraczki.

Experts say men have better access than women to quality education and training, which means they can seek better-paid jobs. "Part of the reason why women get lower-paid jobs is because they generally have a lower level of skills," says Sukti Dasgupta, a senior employment specialist at the ILO.

Ms. Dasgupta says governments need to incorporate gender equality into social programs. One example is India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which began in 2006 and includes a 30 percent quota for women, and a requirement that employers provide childcare facilities.

"We see that women's participation is higher now," she says.

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