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# Women and labour markets in Asia

Rebalancing for gender equality



A joint publication of the  
International Labour Organization and Asian Development Bank





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First published (2011)

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Women and labour markets in Asia : rebalancing towards gender equality in labour markets in Asia / ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific ; Asian Development Bank. - Bangkok: ILO, 2011  
56 p.

ISBN: 9789221247074; 9789221247081 (web pdf)

ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific; Asian Development Bank

gender equality / labour market / women workers / Asia

04.02.3

*ILO Cataloguing in Publication Data*

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Printed in Thailand

# Foreword

The global financial and economic crisis has highlighted the need for greater gender equality in the labour market to counter vulnerability to economic shocks and to support recovery and poverty reduction. Investing in women's full economic potential is critical to increasing productivity and economic growth, and supporting the move towards a more balanced and sustainable development. Not doing so is an under-utilization of available human resources and hampering of productive diversity. Moreover, reducing gender barriers to decent work is fundamental to advancing the inclusive growth agenda and optimizing the positive spin-off effects of increased income levels for women, and therefore on their families and communities. In other words, investing in gender equality plays a key role in harnessing domestic demand and rebalancing growth in developing Asia.

Yet, gender inequality in labour markets remains a persistent phenomenon, albeit to varying degrees depending on regional, national and local contexts. Women continue to disproportionately face a range of multiple challenges relating to access to employment, choice of work, working conditions, employment security, wage parity, discrimination, and balancing the competing burdens of work and family responsibilities. Labour market gender gaps are more pronounced in developing countries, and often exacerbated by gendered patterns in occupational segregation, with the majority of women's work typically concentrated in a narrow range of sectors, many of which are vulnerable and insecure. Women are also increasingly migrating in larger numbers for work due to limited labour market opportunities at home. In addition, women are heavily represented in the informal economy where their exposure to risk of exploitation is usually greatest and they have the least formal protection. The informal economy provides a vital source of livelihoods for masses of women and families, including during tough economic times.

This publication provides an overview and trend analysis of available information on where and how women work, and under what conditions, before, during and after the recent crisis as well as in the current recovery. It aims to offer evidence-based policy recommendations on strategies to advance gender equality through addressing persistent gender labour market gaps, which could contribute to strong, balanced and sustainable development in the region. In particular, it delivers key messages on the importance of directing policy towards the informal economy in the context of inclusive growth, underpinned by sufficient decent work opportunities.

We would like to thank the main author, Lin Lean Lim, for her dedication in writing the report under a demanding time schedule; and Sara Elder, from the ILO for contributing with data analysis. Appreciation is also extended to Gyorgy Sziraczki from the ILO and Samantha Hung from ADB for initiating, guiding and technically supporting the preparation of the report. Special mention should be given to Phu Huynh and Somsward Punkrasin from the ILO for careful editing of the manuscript and managing the production of the publication.

Consistent with the spirit of our cooperation, this publication is a joint undertaking of ADB and the ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, reflecting the high-level commitment of both organizations to support the pursuit of gender equality for the Asia and the Pacific region as economic and social investment which will generate enormous dividends for sustainable development in the region. We are particularly pleased to launch it for Labour Day, and during the centenary year of International Women's Day celebrations. We trust that readers will find it a useful, stimulating and thought-provoking source of information and policy ideas.



*Ursula Schaefer-Preuss  
Vice President  
(Knowledge Management  
and Sustainable Development)  
Asian Development Bank*



*Sachiko Yamamoto  
Regional Director  
Asia and the Pacific Region  
International Labour Organization*

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# Executive Summary

This joint ADB and ILO publication offers evidence-based policy recommendations on strategies to advance gender equality by addressing persistent gender labour market gaps that hinder strong, balanced and sustainable development in the Asia region. While undoubtedly some progress has been made in past decades in addressing gender inequality, discrimination against women 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.

Chapter One provides a short introduction to the publication. Chapter Two presents an overview and trend analysis on where and how women work and under what conditions, and it examines gender inequities that prevail, including in the informal economy. It highlights that despite robust economic growth in the region between 2000 and 2007, gender gaps persist in the labour market in terms of labour utilization and where and how women and men work. It emphasizes that while Asian women have fared relatively better than women in many other regions of the world, their full productive potential remains untapped, and the quality of their employment typically leaves them disadvantaged and vulnerable compared to men. This is evident in the gender gaps in economic activity, concentration of women in low-productivity agricultural employment, and female predominance in vulnerable and low-paid informal jobs. Chapter Two also shows that gender differentials extend to opportunities for mobilizing and organizing, and the ways in which women's and men's roles have been coordinated and protected through policies. Gender analysis would be sadly lacking without a focus on the situation of women in the informal economy, given the large size and great significance of the informal economy in Asia and the concentration of women in the most vulnerable categories of informal employment. Women have tended to make up the "buffer workforce" – both within labour markets and as flexible and expanded workers, concentrated in informal jobs and within the household as "secondary earners".

Chapter Three examines the impact of the global economic and financial crisis which began in 2008: women disproportionately shouldered the brunt of the impacts because they were already structurally disempowered and marginalized in the labour market before the crisis. In addition, due to their reproductive responsibilities, they were mainly responsible for household adjustment and coping strategies. Women were hard hit by the first-round impact in terms of job-losses in export-oriented industries, and unemployment and underemployment, as well as the knock-on effects on informal employment. Women 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 upon which they can rely. Women migrant workers were less affected by job losses, but the crisis exposed their vulnerability to discrimination, exploitation and abuse. The focus is on those developing countries in Asia where field studies, including focus group discussions with women workers, provided unique data on the

impacts. The latter part of the chapter shows that while the palpable sense of crisis has receded since 2010, and Asia is on track for a strong recovery, labour market problems persist, and many women workers remain poor and vulnerable.

Finally, Chapter Four looks ahead to examine the likely gendered implications of the various components of “rebalancing” – some of which will continue or even exacerbate gender inequality and women’s vulnerability in the labour market, and some of which offer potential for decent jobs for women. It then presents gender-responsive rebalancing policies that will help ensure that future development in Asia is sustainable and inclusive, and equitably provides decent work for all women and men. Such policies include, amongst other things: gender-focused approaches to support women entrepreneurs to establish formal enterprises; assisting women engaged in agriculture to boost rural productivity and incomes; promoting equal opportunities for girls and women to access quality education and skills training; gender-responsive social protection measures; targeted policies for particularly disadvantaged women workers; and helping to reduce the overreliance of developing Asia on the informal sector to absorb its workforce during economic recessions. In particular, this report delivers key messages on the importance of directing policy towards the informal economy in the context of inclusive growth, underpinned by sufficient decent work opportunities.

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, especially women in the informal labour market. 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, women face the risk of persistent vulnerability, poverty and exploitation.

There is now a window of opportunity in all Asian countries to address systematic gender inequalities as well as the symptoms thrown up by the crisis to achieve full labour market recovery and successful rebalancing. The economic and human costs of not seizing this opportunity will negatively impact the future socioeconomic development of the region. Moreover, creating an enabling environment of equal opportunity and treatment in the labour market for both women and men will contribute to poverty reduction, and the achievement of the MDGs and social justice.

# 1. Introduction

The Asia and Pacific region is losing US\$42 billion to US\$47 billion annually because of women's limited access to employment opportunities, and another US\$16 billion to US\$30 billion annually as a result of gender gaps in education. Failure to achieve Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target 3 on the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women could reduce per capita income growth rates by 0.1–0.3 percentage points.<sup>1</sup> The losses would have increased with the global economic crisis of 2008–2009, since women suffered disproportionately. Gender inequalities that pre-date the crisis underlie the inequalities arising specifically from the crisis and also explain why women paid a heavier price than men.

The annual average employment growth for 2000–2007 was higher for Asian women than for Asian men, and the employment-to-population ratio for Asian women was also higher than the world average for women. Asian women have certainly been an engine of the region's economic dynamism. But 45 per cent of working-age Asian women were inactive compared to 19 per cent of men, and differentials persist in the types of jobs women and men have access to, the level and regularity of their earnings, the opportunities for mobilizing and organizing, and the ways in which women's and men's productive and reproductive roles are coordinated and protected through policies. In developing Asian countries, women still make up the “buffer workforce” – both within labour markets as flexible and expendable workers concentrated in informal employment and within households as “secondary earners” or “added workers”. However, women themselves had few buffers against economic crises and the range and effectiveness of their buffers were inadequate.

Recent data on growth of output confirm that developing Asia is leading the world in a strong recovery from the global economic crisis.<sup>2</sup> Other key macroeconomic indicators: private consumption, gross fixed investment and trade had also recovered by 2010, in some cases surpassing pre-crisis levels. But the recovery in economic growth has not been matched by labour market recovery, and the employment outlook is uncertain (ILO 2011). In some developing countries particularly in East Asia, job growth is back but the quality of jobs is a major concern. Overall, in developed and developing countries in Asia, unemployment rates remain elevated; high youth unemployment together with a growing number of discouraged youth poses a serious challenge. Progress in reducing vulnerable employment has stagnated, and progress in reducing working poverty has slowed. Moreover, gender-based inequities in the labour market persist, in part due to the expansion and feminization of informal employment. The poor labour market recovery exacerbates the tremendous human costs of the crisis and threatens sustained economic recovery and future socio-economic development.

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<sup>1</sup> UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, [http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/financial-crisis/gender.shtml?utm\\_source=redirect&utm\\_medium=online&utm\\_campaign=redirect](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/financial-crisis/gender.shtml?utm_source=redirect&utm_medium=online&utm_campaign=redirect) (accessed 7 Feb. 2011)

<sup>2</sup> International Monetary Fund: *World economic outlook update*, Washington, DC, Jan. 2011, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2011/update/01/index.htm> (accessed 7 Feb. 2011)

The crisis response and recovery policies of Asian governments have been shaped by the lessons learned from the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s. An important lesson emerging from the recent crisis is that the policy goal should not be to return to a “normal” pre-crisis situation but to address fundamentals and not just short-term urgencies, and seize the opportunity to rebalance towards a new development trajectory that is job-rich, just, sustainable and inclusive. The main components of “rebalancing” have been identified as firstly, rebalancing demand in the recovery towards private sector investment and consumption<sup>3</sup> and, in the post crisis era, promoting stronger domestic-led growth in place of export-led growth, shifts to green jobs and green enterprises and deeper Asian regional integration (ILO 2010b, ADB 2009). To this end, specific measures such as supporting women’s entrepreneurship and small and medium-sized enterprises, assisting women in agriculture and rural employment and establishing gender-responsive social protection systems, among others, is critical. The theme of this report is that such rebalancing must, as a matter of both “smart economics” and social justice, also promote gender equality in the labour market. To be successful, rebalancing policies must mainstream gender equality considerations.

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<sup>3</sup> In the crisis, countries tried to maintain aggregate demand through fiscal stimulus (public spending) to preserve jobs as much as possible and avoid a sharp economic contraction and possible collapse. But this cannot go on for long. Economic recovery is not possible without the revival of private investment and consumption. In that context, there is the need for “rebalancing” demand in the recovery towards private sector investment and consumption. But this is only the recovery phase. In the post crisis era, rebalancing means something different, including stronger domestic-led growth. Moreover, as public spending on education, health, social protection, infrastructure, etc. has been traditionally very low in many countries of Asia, rebalancing also means that governments have to increase such spending (which is usually part of the budget reform).

## 2. Women in labour markets in Asia

### 2.1. Gender inequities in labour utilization

Table 2.1 shows that for the period 2000–2007, employment elasticity and annual average employment growth rates were higher for women than for men, both in Asia and the world.<sup>4</sup> However, Figure 2.1 indicates that 45 per cent of the productive potential of Asian women, as measured by the share of women outside the labour force, remained untapped compared to 19 per cent of Asian men. And the likelihood of men working was much higher at 77 per cent relative to 53 per cent for women. Furthermore, when compared to Asia’s high GDP growth rate, overall employment growth was dismal for both women and men; and when compared to the global female employment elasticity of 0.47, the Asian figure of 0.27 suggests that Asian women gained less than women worldwide in terms of employment growth.

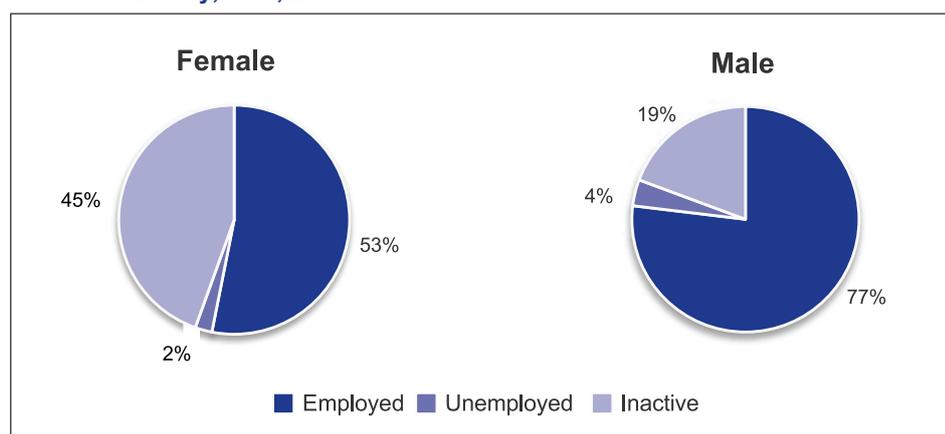
*The productive potential of Asian women remains relatively untapped*

**Table 2.1. Annual real GDP growth rate, employment growth rate and employment elasticities (average 2000-07), Asia and global, by sex**

	Average annual employment growth, 2000-07 (%)	Average annual real GDP growth rate, 2000-07 (%)	Employment elasticity, 2000-07
<b>Asia</b>			
Female	1.68	6.21	0.27
Male	1.54		0.25
<b>World</b>			
Female	1.99	4.20	0.47
Male	1.71		0.41

Sources: ILO, Trends econometric models, October 2010 (employment growth) and IMF, World economic outlook, October 2010 (GDP growth).

**Figure 2.1. Distribution of female and male working-age populations by main economic activity, Asia, 2009**

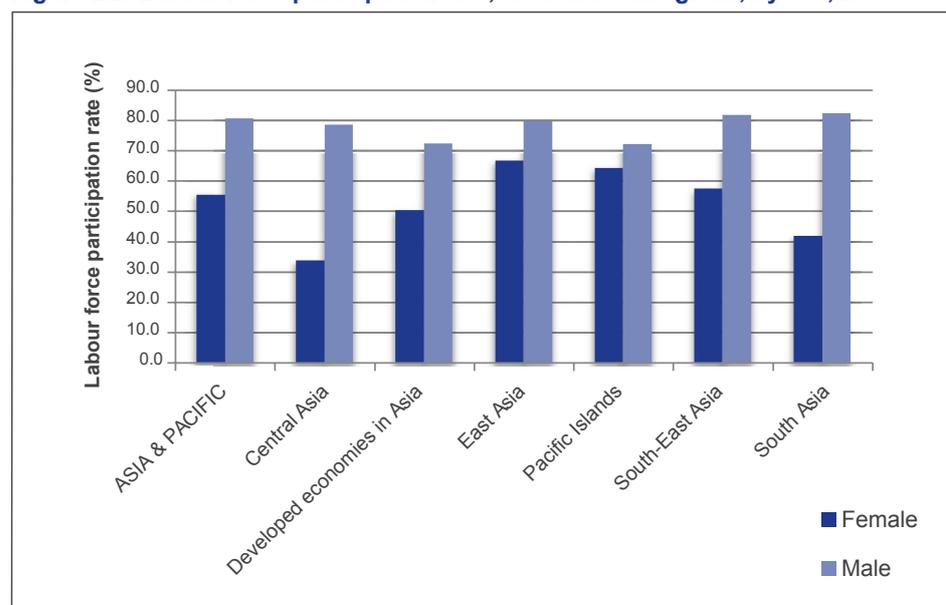


Source: ILO, Trends econometric models, October 2010.

\* Employed includes wage/salary earners, employers, own-account workers and contributing family members

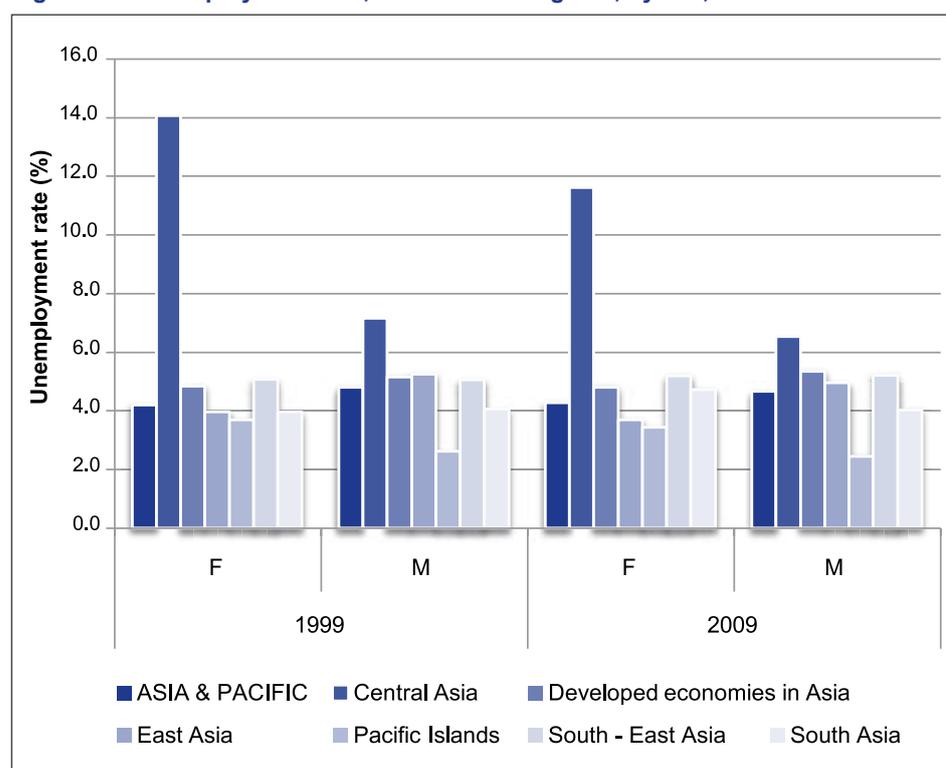
<sup>4</sup> Employment elasticities provide a numerical measure of how employment growth varies with growth in economic output. An elasticity of 0.4, for example, implies that every 1 percentage point of GDP growth is associated with employment growth of 0.4 percentage points.

**Figure 2.2. Labour force participation rate, Asia and subregions, by sex, 2009**



Source: ILO, Trends econometric models, October 2010.

**Figure 2.3. Unemployment rate, Asia and subregions, by sex, 1999 and 2009**



Source: ILO, Trends econometric models, October 2010.

In terms of *labour force participation rates* (LFPRs), Figure 2.2 shows a male-female gap of 25.2 percentage points in 2009.<sup>5</sup> The female LFPR was 55.5 while that of males was 80.7 per cent. The largest gender gaps were in Central Asia and South Asia, where the female LFPRs were the lowest in Asia. It is also striking that the female LFPR in the Developed Economies

<sup>5</sup> The labour force participation rate measures the proportion of a country's working-age population that engages actively in the labour market either by working or looking for work.

in Asia (defined here to include Australia, Japan and New Zealand) at 50.4 per cent ranked lowest after Central Asia and South Asia. Within each subregion there was often wide disparity; for instance, in South Asia the female LFPR was a low of 32.8 per cent in India and a high of 63.3 per cent in Nepal.

Asia is unique in both its relatively low female unemployment rate and its positive male-female gap (the regional unemployment rate for women was 4.3 per cent in 2009, compared to 4.7 per cent for men and well below the global female rate of 6.5 per cent, as depicted in Figure 2.3). All other developing regions in the world show women to be disadvantaged compared to men when it comes to finding work. But, as discussed below, the relatively low unemployment rate for Asian women is most likely attributable to the persisting high demand for low-wage female labour in export-oriented manufacturing and to the fact that most women cannot afford to be unemployed and have to find work in the informal economy. Subregions reveal different patterns: female unemployment rates were higher than male rates in Central Asia, the Pacific Islands and South Asia. In South-East Asia, female and male rates were roughly equal, while in the Developed Asian Economies and East Asia, women were less likely to be openly unemployed than men.

Table 2.2 shows that in all subregions but East Asia, the unemployment rate was higher for young women than young men and also the youth labour force participation rate and employment-to-population ratio were significantly lower for young women than young men. Educational levels have been going up for both young women and young men, and in many cases young women are doing better than young men in school. But female youth still encounter more barriers to making the transition from school to work.<sup>6</sup> The lower unemployment rate and, on the other hand, higher labour force participation rate for young women as compared to young men in East Asia is unique in the world. This is due to East Asia's success at creating opportunities for women in the workforce, but it may also reflect reliance on low-wage female labour in export-oriented industries (ILO 2011, p. 39).

*The female unemployment rate was relatively low and the male-female gap positive, but this does not mean that Asian women are better off in the labour market*

*A key indicator of gender inequality is that young women faced much greater difficulties entering the labour force than young men*

---

<sup>6</sup> ILO School-to-work transition surveys in Azerbaijan, People's Republic of China, Egypt, Islamic Republic of Iran, Kosovo, Mongolia, Nepal and Syria reached the following conclusion: "Successful transitions are often correlated with gender. There are serious gaps in participation rates and transition outcomes between young women and men. In most countries, young women remain much more likely to be neither economically active nor in school. Many young women are not free to pursue the possibility of working outside of the home, and for others, the lack of outside demand for productive work by women, due to social or cultural reasons, is enough to discourage them from engaging in the job search. Most young women who do enter the labour market face a lengthy job search before finally settling into an unsatisfactory job where they will be paid less than men" (Matsumoto and Elder 2010, p. 72).

**Table 2.2. Youth labour force participation rate, youth employment-to-population ratio, youth unemployment rate and ratio of youth-to-adult unemployment rate by sex and region, 1999, 2009**

Indicator/Region	Total		Males		Females	
	1999	2009	1999	2009	1999	2009
<b>Youth labour force participation rate:</b>						
World	54.2	51.1	62.3	58.7	45.6	43.1
Asia	57.8	53.4	64.9	60.2	50.3	46.0
Central Asia	42.3	45.0	60.4	61.6	23.4	27.7
East Asia	67.6	59.8	63.8	57.5	71.6	62.3
Pacific Islands	54.7	55.0	55.6	55.6	53.8	54.3
South-East Asia	58.1	52.3	66.6	60.0	49.5	44.3
South Asia	49.7	48.4	66.4	63.5	31.8	32.1
<b>Youth employment to population ratio:</b>						
World	47.2	44.6	54.5	51.3	39.7	37.5
Asia	52.1	48.0	58.1	53.8	45.8	41.6
Central Asia	35.4	38.7	52.2	54.3	17.8	22.2
East Asia	61.3	54.5	56.9	51.6	66.1	57.7
Pacific Islands	51.0	51.4	52.4	52.5	49.5	50.2
South-East Asia	50.6	44.9	58.1	51.7	43.0	38.0
South Asia	45.1	43.6	60.1	57.2	28.9	28.9
<b>Youth unemployment rate:</b>						
World	12.8	12.8	12.6	12.7	13.0	12.9
Asia	9.9	10.2	10.5	10.7	9.1	9.4
Central Asia	16.3	14.2	13.5	11.9	23.9	19.6
East Asia	9.2	8.9	10.8	10.3	7.7	7.4
Pacific Islands	6.9	6.6	5.9	5.6	8.0	7.6
South-East Asia	12.9	14.0	12.7	13.9	13.2	14.2
South Asia	9.4	10.0	9.5	9.9	9.2	10.1
<b>Ratio of youth-to-adult unemployment rate:</b>						
World	2.7	2.7	2.8	2.7	2.6	2.6
Asia	3.2	3.2	3.1	3.3	3.3	3.1
Central Asia	2.5	2.4	2.7	2.5	2.2	2.2
East Asia	2.5	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.6
Pacific Islands	4.0	3.9	3.9	3.9	3.9	3.9
South-East Asia	4.9	4.5	4.7	4.4	5.3	4.6
South Asia	4.1	3.7	4.1	4.2	4.1	3.1

Source: ILO, Trends econometric models, October 2010

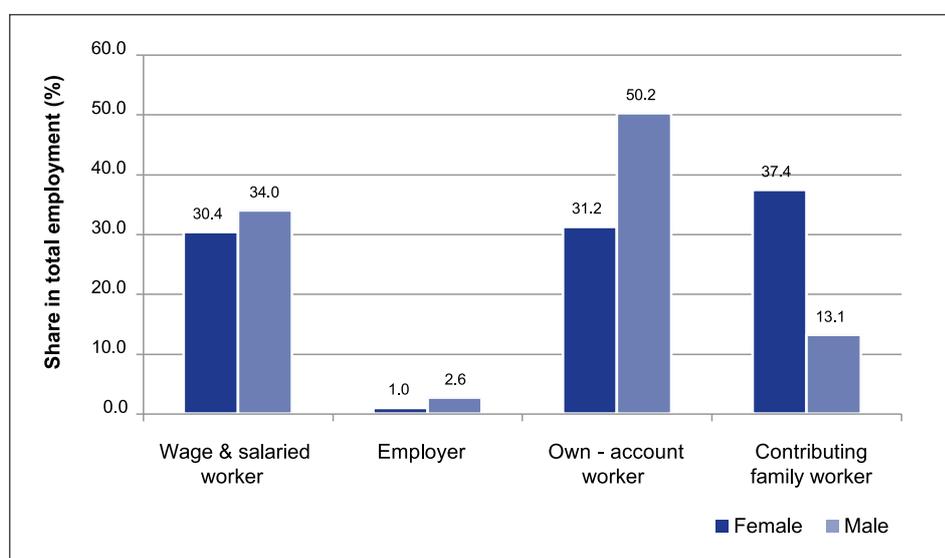
## 2.2. Where and how Asian women work

*Where and how Asian women work leaves them more vulnerable than men in the labour market*

Employment status in the labour market reflects working conditions and the arrangements for work: notably the explicit or implicit contract of employment, the degree of control over work and its output, the exposure to and responsibility for economic risks involved, and the relative share of capital and labour invested in work. Figure 2.4 shows that in 2009, less than a third of male and female workers engaged in regular wage and salaried employment in Asia, a strong indication of weak labour market institutions and a large informal economy (as discussed in Section 2.3 below). It also indicates that non-paid work in a family establishment is very much a female domain while men dominate the own-account (self-employment with no employees) and employer statuses. Only 1 per cent of all women workers in Asia were running their own business with paid employees; the entrepreneurial capabilities of Asian women are far from being tapped.

Contributing family workers and own-account workers are classified as “vulnerable employment”<sup>7</sup> in the employment-related target for MDG1 to eradicate poverty and hunger through “full and decent employment for all, including women and young people”. Table 2.3 confirms that not only did vulnerable employment account for more than half of total employment but also the vulnerable employment share was higher for women than men. South Asia had the highest rate of vulnerable employment among all regions in the world at 84.5 per cent for women and 74.8 per cent for men, suggesting that the subregion’s high rates of employment growth<sup>8</sup> did not automatically equate to positive labour market trends (ILO 2011, p. 46). It is obvious that to achieve MDG3 and MDG target 1b and, in fact virtually all remaining goals and targets, urgent priority needs to be given to where and how women work.

**Figure 2.4. Distribution of total employment by status in employment, Asia, by sex, 2009**



Source: ILO, Trends econometric models, October 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Vulnerable employment has been adopted as an indicator of MDG target 1b; it is a newly defined measure of persons who are employed under relatively precarious circumstances as indicated by the status in employment. Because contributing family workers and own account workers are less likely to have formal work arrangements, access to benefits or social protection programmes and are more “at risk” to economic cycles, these are the statuses categorized as “vulnerable”. The indicator is highly gender sensitive since, historically, contributing family work is a status that is dominated by women. There is also a connection between vulnerable employment and poverty: if the proportion of vulnerable workers is sizeable, it may be an indication of widespread poverty. The connection arises because workers in the vulnerable statuses lack the social protection and safety nets to guard against times of low economic demand and often are incapable of generating sufficient savings for themselves and their families to offset these times. See ILO 2009f, p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> Annual employment growth in South Asia was 2.6 per cent in 2008 and 2.2 per cent in 2009 as compared to the world rates of 1.5 and 0.7 per cent respectively (ILO 2011, Table A6).

**Table 2.3. Vulnerable employment shares, Asia, by sex, 1999, 2009 (% of total employment)**

	1999	2009
<b>World</b>	53.5	50.1
Male	51.8	48.9
Female	56.1	51.9
<b>East Asia</b>	60.2	50.8
Male	55.7	47.8
Female	65.7	54.6
<b>South-East Asia and the Pacific</b>	66.2	61.8
Male	62.5	58.9
Female	71.3	65.7
<b>South Asia</b>	81.1	78.5
Male	78.1	75.8
Female	88.5	84.5

Source: ILO. 2011. Table A12.

**Table 2.4. Distribution of total employment by sector of employment (%), Asia and subregions, by sex, 2009**

	Agriculture	Industry	Services
<b>Female</b>			
ASIA-PACIFIC	48.2	18.2	33.6
Central Asia	50.3	15.0	34.7
Developed economies in Asia	3.9	15.3	80.8
East Asia	41.5	22.2	36.3
Pacific Islands	75.0	4.5	20.6
South-East Asia	43.7	14.4	41.9
South Asia	71.0	13.6	15.5
<b>Male</b>			
ASIA-PACIFIC	38.9	26.2	35.0
Central Asia	33.6	24.6	41.9
Developed economies in Asia	4.4	34.2	61.4
East Asia	33.6	31.8	34.6
Pacific Islands	64.4	7.0	28.6
South-East Asia	44.1	20.4	35.5
South Asia	46.4	21.4	32.2

Source: ILO, Trends econometric models, October 2010.

*Women were more likely than men to be working in low-productivity, subsistence-level agriculture*

For Asia as a whole, 48.2 per cent of women worked in the agricultural sector in 2009, compared to 38.9 per cent of men (Table 2.4). Agriculture remained the most prominent employer of women in all Asian subregions but Developed Economies in Asia. In the Pacific Islands and South Asia, the concentration of employed women in agriculture was especially heavy. The common patterns observed are that women are the main producers of food while men manage most of the commercial crops; working conditions for female agricultural wage workers tend to be harsher than for their male counterparts; there are very high shares of unremunerated female family workers and increasing casualization of both male and female agricultural labour; and despite the hazardous nature of the work and the high levels of risk, agriculture is often the least well-covered sector as far as national occupational safety and health regulations are concerned.<sup>9</sup> As the agricultural

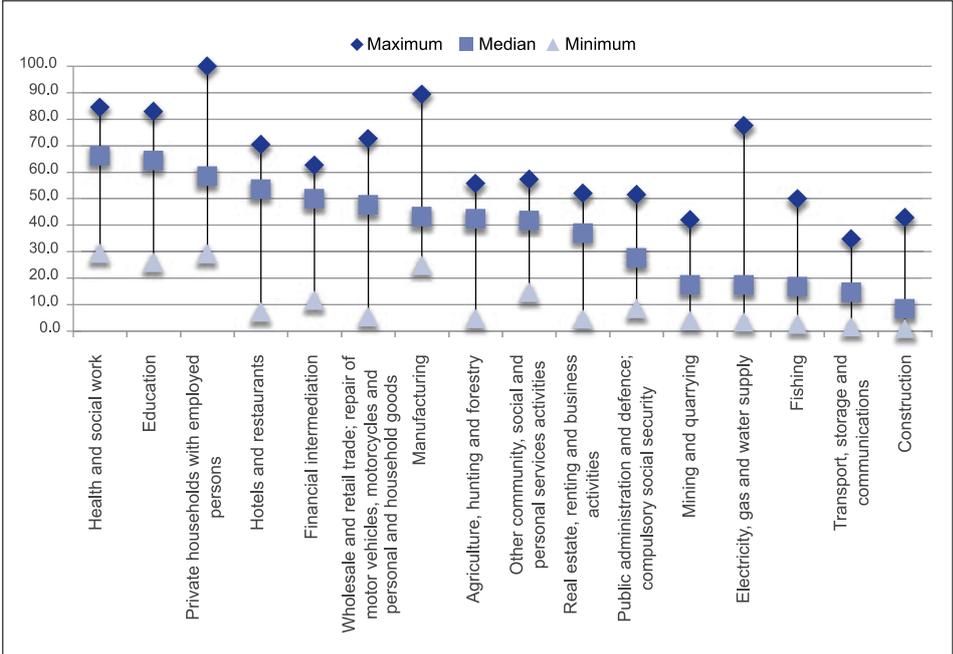
<sup>9</sup> See FAO, IFAD and ILO. 2010, pp. 12-13.

sector typically has the lowest average levels of labour productivity, “this provides strong evidence that women [particularly in South Asia] who do manage to work are disproportionately engaged in low-productivity employment” (ILO 2011, p. 46).

The six service sectors in Asia where women accounted for more than 50 per cent of the workforce were health and social work, education, private households with employed persons, hotels and restaurants, and financial intermediation (Figure 2.5). The finance sector can offer decent jobs for women, as can the health and education sectors, particularly if these are government-run. However, even within these sectors where they dominate in terms of numbers, they do not tend to hold the upper level, managerial positions. In the health sector, women are predominantly in nursing and are poorly represented in the higher echelons; the doctors are mainly men (ILO 2009d, p. 123). In education, women constitute a high proportion of primary school teachers but a much lower proportion of university teaching staff (UN 2010, pp. 92-93). The category of “private households with employed persons” includes domestic maids, cooks, waiters, valets, butlers, laundresses, gardeners, gatekeepers, stable lads, chauffeurs, caretakers, governesses, babysitters, tutors, secretaries, etc. As discussed in Section 2.3 below, such work is informal, often outside the purview of labour law, labour inspection and social protection.

*Some service sector jobs offer prospects for decent work for women but others are frequently characterized by low pay, long hours and often informal working arrangements*

**Figure 2.5. Female share of employment by 1-digit sector in 26 Asian countries/territories, minimum, maximum and median (latest years)**



Source: Constructed from ILO 2009e, table 4b (ISIC Rev. 3).

*The “feminization” of employment in export-oriented manufacturing appears to have passed its peak but the reasons for preferring female to male workers still hold – and underscore gender norms and women’s vulnerability*

Men outnumbered women in industry but in several Asian countries there were more women employed in manufacturing than men. The “feminization” of employment in labour-intensive manufacturing in Asia’s export processing zones/special economic zones (with women accounting for between 70 to 90 per cent of the workforce) was a hot topic especially in the 1990s and early 2000s. Although such feminization may have peaked and be in decline (Milberg and Amengual 2008, p. 13; and Wick 2010, p. 30), it is still important to remind ourselves of the reasons why manufacturers in global supply chains prefer to hire women: they are seen to be “more tractable and subservient to managerial authority, less prone to organize into unions, more willing to accept lower wages because of their own lower reservation and aspiration wages, and easier to dismiss using life-cycle criteria such as marriage and childbirth” (UNESCAP 2002, p. 94). Today, these reasons still explain the predominance of women, especially young women, in such export-oriented manufacturing.

*Pay differentials remain one of the most persistent forms of gender inequality in the labour market*

Many factors contribute to the pay gap and it is difficult to distinguish between differences resulting from labour market characteristics (skills, education, participation rates, etc.) and direct or indirect discrimination (ILO 2010c, p. 52). Data limitations hamper comparability across sexes, occupations and countries. That said, women’s wages typically represent between 70 and 90 per cent of men’s wages, entry level wages tend to be lower for women than for men, and there appears to be a persistent pay gap between men and women engaged in similar work, especially in professional and executive-level jobs and skilled trades (ILO 2008, p. 29).

### **2.3. Women in the informal economy**

Gender inequality in Asian labour markets is significant in terms of the sex distribution between formal and informal employment and also within the informal economy.<sup>10</sup> Directly measured Asia-wide data on the informal sector and informal employment are not available. But recent measurement initiatives<sup>11</sup> in some countries, based on the concepts

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<sup>10</sup> However, it is important to note that there is no clear dichotomy or split between the “informal economy” and the “formal economy”, they are closely linked. Formal and informal enterprises and workers coexist along a continuum, with the formal end regulated and well protected, while decent work deficits most serious at the informal end. What happens in the formal economy will impact on the informal economy and vice versa (ILO 2002a, p. 4).

<sup>11</sup> ADB Regional Technical Assistance (RETA) 6430: Measuring the Informal Sector measures the informal sector and informal employment in Armenia, Bangladesh and Indonesia, <http://www.adb.org/Statistics/reta-6430.asp>. (accessed 7 Feb. 2011).

The UN ESCAP Project on Interregional Cooperation on the Measurement of Informal Sector and Informal Employment is a multiyear and multilateral development account project involving a number of collaborating UN agencies including the ILO and also the Delhi Group (UN Expert Group on Informal Sector Statistics) and covers Mongolia, Philippines and Sri Lanka, [http://www.unescap.org/stat/isie/#About\\_Project](http://www.unescap.org/stat/isie/#About_Project). (accessed 7 Feb. 2011).

Both ADB and UN ESCAP projects use the same survey methodology. The “mixed” or “1-2” survey is a cost-effective, two-phase method to measure informal employment both in and outside the informal sector. The approach utilizes a household survey in the first phase to identify household unincorporated enterprises with some market production (HUEMs). The HUEMs belonging either in the agricultural or non-agricultural sectors are the target units of the sampling frame for the second phase or the Informal Sector survey.

and definitions in the Appendix, together with information from other estimation sources, confirm that Asia's informal economy is huge, multi-segmented and gender-segregated.

**Table 2.5. Informal employment by country and sex, various years**

Country/ Region	Year	Informal Employment as % of non- agricultural employment	Women's Informal Employment as % of women's non-agricultural employment	Men's Informal Employment as % of men's non-agricultural employment
Bangladesh <sup>a</sup>	2005	87.7	91.3	86.6
India <sup>b</sup>	2004/05	..	88.0	84.0
Indonesia/ Yogyakarta <sup>c</sup>	2009	79.2	81.6	77.4
Indonesia/ Banten <sup>c</sup>	2009	69.7	68.4	70.4
Mongolia <sup>d</sup>	2007/08	26.3	23.7	28.9
Nepal <sup>e</sup>	2008	86.4	91.8	83.8
Philippines <sup>d</sup>	2009	57.5	57.0	58.0
Thailand <sup>f</sup>	1994/2000	51.0	54.0	49.0
Asia <sup>f</sup>	1994/2000	65.0	65.0	65.0

Sources:

- a. Maligalig, D.S. et.al. 2009, Table 14 based on Bangladesh labour force survey
- b. UN. 2010, Table 4.7 based on estimates from the Survey of employment and unemployment
- c. BPS-Statistics Indonesia. 2010, Table 2.1 based on a mixed survey: the expanded 2009 National labour force survey (Sakernas) and the informal sector survey
- d. Heintz. 2010. Tables 1 and 2 from the Informal Sector Survey 2009 Phase  
1 Philippines and the Mongolia labour force survey 2007/08.
- e. Central Bureau of Statistics.2008, Table 12.0 based on the Nepal labour force survey
- f. ILO. 2002b, Table 2.1 based on a residual method of estimation.

Table 2.5 shows that the bulk of employment in non-agriculture in developing countries in Asia is informal.<sup>12</sup> And if we consider that a relatively large share of total employment is in agriculture (as shown above in Table 2.4) and agricultural employment is highly informalized, the share of informal employment in total employment would be higher still. In Nepal, 96 per cent were informally employed out of total (agricultural and non-agricultural) employment, as compared to 86 per cent in total non-agricultural employment (Central Bureau of Statistics 2008, pp. 125-126). In India, 92 per cent of workers were informal as compared to 84 per cent in total non-agriculture (NCEUS 2009, p. 2). In Bangladesh, as well as in the provinces of Yogyakarta and Banten, Indonesia, at least 98 per cent in agricultural employment are informal (ADB 2010b, p. 2). In the Philippines, 90 per cent of workers in agriculture are informal, while in Mongolia the percentage is 81 (Heintz 2010, pp. 21-22).

This is because in several Asian, especially South Asian, countries, women's labour force participation rates are much lower than men's. In India, for example, women represent only 31 per cent of the total workforce and 32 per cent of the informal workforce but of the female workforce, 96 per cent are informally employed (Chen and Doane 2008, p. 17). In Bangladesh, women account for only 24 per cent of the

*The informal economy is not necessarily predominantly female but women are much more likely than men to be informally employed*

<sup>12</sup> Only in Mongolia outside of agriculture is total formal employment larger than informal employment –mainly because the public sector plays a significant role in providing formal jobs. See Heintz 2010, pp. 11-12.

employed labour force and three-quarters of all informal workers are males, but 91 per cent of women workers are informally employed as compared to 87 per cent of the men (Maligalig et. al. 2009, p. 26). Mongolia and the Philippines are somewhat exceptional in that a higher percentage of employed men work in informal non-agricultural jobs than employed women.<sup>13</sup>

*Women are over-represented in the most vulnerable, poorest forms of informal employment*

Gender inequality exists not only in the quantity but also the quality of informal employment. While there may be more men than women in total informal employment, women are concentrated in the most vulnerable and poorest forms of informal employment – where they have low, irregular or no cash returns, are subject to a high level of job insecurity and do not have safety nets to cover them during periods of low economic demand or when they cannot work or do not have work. As depicted in Figure 2.6 and quantified in Table 2.6 the informal economy is gender segregated by employment status, with the employer category very much a male domain and the most vulnerable category of contributing (unpaid) family workers predominantly female.

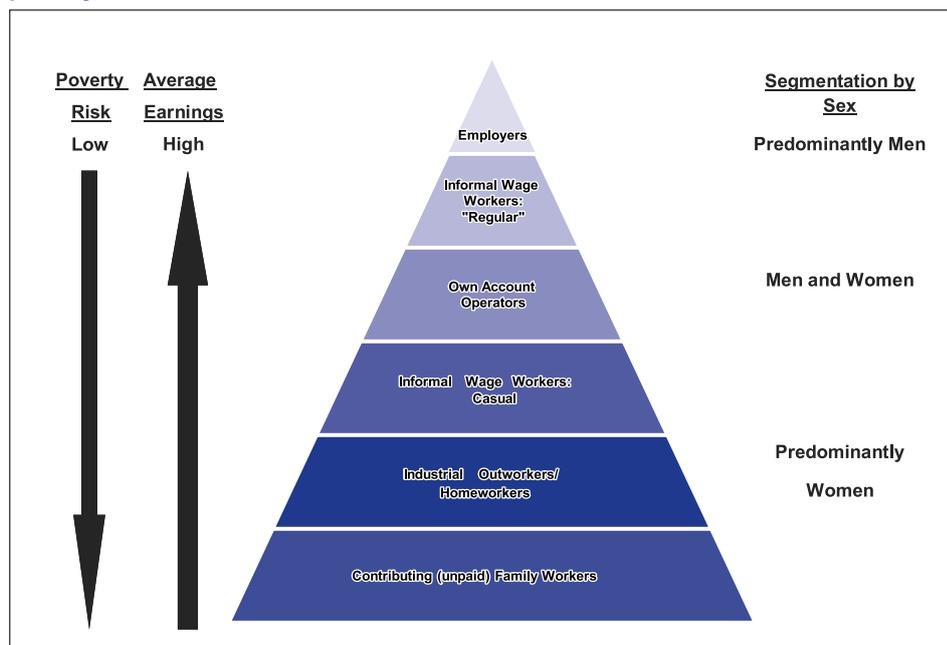
The segmented “iceberg” in Figure 2.6 represents the hierarchy of the classes of workers in informal employment according to their relative visibility and quality of employment; it also represents the hierarchy of average earnings across the different segments. At the tip are employers who are the most visible among those in informal employment and who also have the highest earnings; whilst at the bottom are contributing (unpaid) family workers and homeworkers who are usually neglected in policy-making and monitoring and who tend to be the poorest.. In Bangladesh, for instance, the share of women working as contributing family workers is nearly double the percentage for men, and two-thirds of all women informally employed are contributing family workers as compared to only 11 per cent of men. On the other hand, men represent an overwhelming majority in the employer category (89 per cent).

Taking together the two categories of contributing family workers and own-account workers, Table 2.6 shows that at least half and as much as three-quarters of all informal women workers are in “vulnerable employment”. It also confirms (as had also been revealed in Table 2.3 above) that women are more likely than men to be in vulnerable employment.

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<sup>13</sup> Heintz 2010, p. 11 attributes the outcome to: (i) the importance of the public sector as a source of formal employment for women; (ii) the larger number of men employed in agriculture (which reduces their relative employment in non-agricultural jobs; and (iii) the low labour force participation rate of women so that those who report being economically active may be better educated or higher skilled and therefore more likely to work in formal jobs. In the case of the Philippines, women’s emigration for employment purposes could also contribute to this pattern.

**Figure 2.6. Segmentation of the informal economy by sex, average earnings and poverty risk**



Source: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). 2010. WIEGO Stance on informal economy. PowerPoint presentation.

Figure 2.6 links segmentation by employment status within the informal economy to a hierarchy of average earnings, highest for informal employers followed by informal wage workers with a steady job and lowest for casual day labourers followed by industrial outworkers. At the same time, gender segmentation within the informal economy, compounded by women’s relative lack of access to resources and skills, contributes to significant gender gaps in earnings within the informal economy. Gender earning differentials in the informal economy mirror, and in many cases surpass, those in the formal sector due to both vertical and horizontal segregation in employment and continuing gender inequalities associated with women’s unpaid reproductive work (Chant and Pedwell 2008, p. 1). In Indonesia, ADB has found that workers in formal employment earn significantly higher, twice as much on average, than those in informal employment; and male workers earn more than female workers in both formal and informal employment.<sup>14</sup> Women in informal employment in Yogyakarta earn 69 per cent of what their male counterparts earn, while in Banten the corresponding ratio is 81 per cent (BPS Statistics Indonesia 2010, pp. 15-16). In Bangladesh, mean weekly income of male informal workers is 31 per cent higher than of female informal workers (Maligalig et. al. 2009, p. 28).

*Women earn significantly less than men in informal employment*

<sup>14</sup> Findings based on ADB RETA project to directly measure the informal sector and informal employment. See: <http://www.adb.org/Statistics/reta-6430.asp> (accessed 8 Mar. 2011).

**Table 2.6. Informal employment by employment status and sex (in percentages)**

Country	Employers		Employees without formal conditions		Own-account/self employed		Contributing (unpaid) family workers	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
<b>Bangladesh (2005):</b>								
Employment status share	89.1	10.9	86.1	13.9	90.5	9.5	34.0	66.0
Informal employment share	0.3	0.1	34.4	16.9	54.1	17.2	11.2	65.9
<b>Indonesia Yogyakarta (2009):</b>								
Employment status share	69.2	30.8	67.3	32.7	61.1	38.9	31.6	68.4
Informal employment share	33.7	21.4	31.5	21.9	23.3	21.2	11.4	35.5
<b>Indonesia Banten (2009):</b>								
Employment status share	77.8	22.2	71.3	28.7	72.8	27.2	25.6	74.4
Informal employment share	17.6	10.1	49.3	39.6	28.1	21.1	5.0	29.2
<b>Nepal (2008):</b>								
Employment status share	84.9	15.1	79.8	20.2	68.2	31.8	30.2	69.8
Informal employment share	5.1	1.8	48.0	23.5	37.7	34.1	9.1	40.6
<b>Philippines (2009):*</b>								
Employment status share	65.3	34.7	75.6	24.4	48.5	51.5	41.3	58.7
Informal employment share	1.3	1.2	66.6	36.4	24.0	43.0	8.1	19.4
<b>Mongolia (2007/08):*</b>								
Employment status share	68.7	31.3	48.3	51.7	66.2	33.8	29.8	70.2
Informal employment share	12.2	7.1	26.8	36.7	54.7	36.9	6.3	19.3

Sources: As in Table 2.5.

\* Philippines and Mongolia informal employment in non-agriculture only

Other countries informal employment in agriculture and non-agriculture

*The risk of poverty, therefore, is higher for women than for men in informal employment*

The link between working in the informal economy and being poor is stronger for women than for men. Informal women workers are the “working poor”, struggling in survivalist activities, working arduous and long hours but not earning enough to support themselves or their families.<sup>15</sup> The low incomes from informal employment create a vicious cycle of poverty, which tends to hit women harder than men since they are mainly responsible for family welfare but are without social protection.

Table 2.7 on Bangladesh is illustrative of a relatively common pattern of gender inequality in informal employment by industry in developing Asian countries. Males dominate in all industry types except in the private households category where 81 per cent are women. The comparable figures are 61 per cent in Nepal (Central Bureau of Statistics 2008, p. 130), 84 per cent in Yogyakarta Indonesia and 72 per cent in Banten Indonesia (BPS Statistics Indonesia 2010, p. 64), 86 per cent in the Philippines (Heintz 2010, p. 23) and 71 per cent in India (Raveendran 2010, p. 4).

<sup>15</sup> In India, for example, in the latest national labour force survey conducted in 2004/05, 36.1 per cent of employed women are considered working poor on the basis of US\$ 1 per day versus a working poverty rate of 30 per cent for men; and 86.4 per cent of employed women live with their families on less than US\$ 2 per person per day, versus 81.4 per cent of employed men (ILO 2009a, p. 19).

**Table 2.7. Informal employment by industry and sex, 2005, Bangladesh**

Industry	Percentage of employment by industry		Percentage of total informal employment	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Agriculture	65.4	34.6	39.3	66.5
Fishing	83.7	16.3	2.5	1.6
Mining & Quarrying	86.1	13.9	0.1	0.1
Manufacturing	75.2	24.8	10.9	11.5
Electricity, gas and water supply	95.7	4.3	0.2	0.0
Construction	93.2	6.8	3.9	0.9
Wholesale and retail trade, repairs, etc,	94.3	5.7	18.6	3.6
Hotels	92.8	7.2	1.8	0.5
Transport, storage and communications	98.3	1.7	10.8	0.6
Financial intermediation	77.4	22.6	1.1	1.0
Real Estate	95.2	4.8	0.6	0.1
Public Administration	88.2	11.8	2.2	0.9
Education	73.8	26.2	2.7	3.0
Health	66.4	33.6	0.7	1.1
Other community	81.2	18.8	4.2	3.1
Private households	19.6	80.5	0.4	5.5
Others	52.3	47.7	0.0	0.0
Total	76.2	23.8	100.0	100.0

Source: Maligalig et.al. 2009, Table 16.

Domestic service has been an important and growing source of informal employment but working in the private households of others, women are particularly exposed to discrimination and human rights abuses. Domestic work is “undervalued, poorly regulated, and many domestic workers remain overworked, underpaid and unprotected. Accounts of maltreatment and abuse, especially of live-in and migrant domestic workers, are regularly denounced in the media.

This state of affairs is due in part to the fact that paid domestic work remains virtually invisible as a form of employment in many countries. Domestic work does not take place in a factory or an office, but in the home. The employees are not male breadwinners, but overwhelmingly women. They do not work alongside other co-workers, but in isolation behind closed doors. Their work is not aimed at producing added value, but at providing care to millions of households. Domestic work typically entails the otherwise unpaid labour traditionally performed in the household by women. This explains why domestic work is undervalued in monetary terms and is often informal and undocumented. It tends to be perceived as something other than regular employment, as not fitting the general framework of existing labour laws despite the fact that its origins go back to the ‘master-servant’ relationship. As a result, the domestic employment relationship is not specifically addressed in many legislative enactments, thus rendering domestic workers vulnerable to unequal, unfair and often abusive treatment” (ILO 2010d, p. 1).

*Women work in private households where they are largely “invisible”*

*Home-based work increases women's economic vulnerability*

Women have also been much more likely than men to work from their own homes. Home-based workers include the self-employed who are engaged in family businesses or own-account operations or are contributing family workers. They are traditional artisans, as well as paid manufacturing outworkers working under subcontracting arrangements in export-oriented production as part of global value chains. The self-employed most likely sell their products locally. The distinction between “place of residence” and “place of work” is blurred and while this is often seen as a benefit in terms of enabling women to combine employment with family responsibilities, it also imposes concrete costs in terms of interruptions to work, lowering productivity and hence income. Home-based work may also increase a woman’s economic vulnerability – as she is less visible and less likely to be legally recognized as a worker, so that she is less able to claim social protection, have access to skills upgrading opportunities or be reached by trade unions and benefit from the solidarity and bargaining power that comes with being organized (Chen and Doane, 2008, p. 24).<sup>16</sup>

*Women informal workers are at the bottom of global supply chains in manufacturing*

The concentration of women in informal employment in manufacturing is largely linked to their status as casual, temporary, contract workers and home-based workers who serve as a “buffer workforce” for global supply chains to accommodate just-in-time ordering, fluctuations in orders and prices, and stiff competition among suppliers, while a smaller core of regular, permanent workers (male or more highly educated women) ensure quality and stability (King Dejardin and Owens 2009, pp. 4-5).

Women informal workers are at the bottom of labour-intensive global supply chains particularly in textiles, garments, leather and footwear and electronics. They are often at the mercy of contractors and middlemen; they have no idea what their products are worth or how to participate more effectively in the chains, they find it particularly hard to gain access to raw materials and to keep up with changing technologies and market demand. They are paid per piece or per dozen pieces produced but earn only a small percentage of the selling price (which could be as low as 2 to 5 per cent). Since they represent a flexible reserve to be drawn into the labour market in upturns and expelled in downturns, they are most likely to be the first to lose their jobs during an economic crisis or recession.

*Trading is often the only option for poor women*

Women accounted for 61 per cent of all informal traders in the Philippines and 65 per cent in Mongolia (Heintz 2010, pp. 31-32), and for 56 per cent of all informal traders or 38 per cent of all informally employed women outside of agriculture in Yogyakarta (BPS Statistics Indonesia 2010, p. 64). Women mainly trade on streets, sidewalks and traffic intersections as fixed-site or mobile traders. “The low costs of entry and flexible hours make street vending an attractive option for poor women; for many, it is the only option they have. Compared to men, female street vendors are more likely to operate in insecure or illegal spaces, trade in less lucrative goods, generate a lower volume of trade, and work as commission agents or employees of other vendors. As a result, they tend to earn less than male vendors.

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<sup>16</sup> Please see section 3.1 for further discussion of the “buffer workforce”.

Like all informal workers, informal street vendors lack legal status, representation, and voice. With a few notable exceptions, they earn low incomes, usually close to the poverty level. Furthermore, they experience several problems specific to their trade: difficulty finding secure spaces to sell from; harassment, demands for bribes, evictions from selling places, arrest, and confiscation of goods by authorities, who often see street vendors as a nuisance or obstruction to other commerce and to traffic; lack of services and infrastructure, such as water, electricity, waste removal, latrines, shelter, storage space, and financial services; high risk for diseases transmitted by vermin, lead poisoning, etc<sup>17</sup>.

Growing numbers of women work away from home, having migrated from rural areas to cities and increasingly to other countries. For many women, as for men, migration can represent a positive experience and have important emancipating and empowering impacts. But women migrants, especially young female migrants, often end up in situations of double or even triple discrimination, disadvantage, marginalization and vulnerability. The multiple layers of discrimination can come in the form of being women vis-a-vis being men, migrants vis-a-vis non-migrants/locals, first-time jobseekers vis-a-vis experienced workers, and foreigners vis-a-vis nationals. Lack of employment opportunities in rural areas and the pressure to contribute to family income, the desire for personal freedoms or to escape social or cultural constraints, coupled with low levels of education and the search for often non-existent formal jobs push migrant women into informal employment. Often the only jobs open to them are the “feminized occupations” as domestic maids and caregivers in other people’s homes, as helpers and cleaners in restaurants and hotels, as salesgirls, and in small unregistered industrial workshops (often “sweatshops”) – jobs which are not or are only partially covered by labour law and social protection provisions. Especially as recent or newcomers to the city, they are much more susceptible than migrant men or local women to exploitation and abuse.

*Being a migrant woman exacerbates vulnerability in informal employment*

Women migrating to urban centres receive lower wages than their male counterparts yet send more of their income home to families who are increasingly dependent on their remittances. They often lack access to the kinds of information they need on labour market opportunities and economic and social services and infrastructure, and have few or no opportunities for establishing networks of information and social support. Furthermore, they often end up in the lowest rungs of informal economy jobs with the most deplorable conditions, including in the entertainment industry and sex work. Women migrants easily fall prey to unscrupulous agents and employers and are victims of trafficking and violence, especially if they are undocumented or illegal migrants.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See: [http://www.wiego.org/publications/FactSheets/WIEGO\\_Street\\_Vendors.pdf](http://www.wiego.org/publications/FactSheets/WIEGO_Street_Vendors.pdf) (accessed 8 Mar. 2011).

<sup>18</sup> The issues of international female migration are dealt with in greater detail in Section 3.3 below.

### 3. Impacts of the crisis on women workers

The Asian region was not spared by the global economic crisis which began in 2008 in the western industrialized world. First-round impacts of the crisis were not consistent across countries, reflecting different levels of reliance on exports and different positions within global supply chains. Text Box 3.1 recalls several gendered aspects in sectors that were severely affected, in particular Asian countries.

#### Text Box 3.1

##### Sectoral and labour market gender impacts of the global economic crisis in Asian countries

**East and South-East Asia:** jobs were disproportionately hit in highly labour-intensive export sectors, including the garment and footwear industries, electronics, construction, tourism, and farmers of selected crops.

**Pacific:** low levels of formal employment meant that export impacts did not translate into increases in recorded unemployment, but affected government revenues and spending.

**People's Republic of China:** among those who lost their jobs, the unemployment rate among women was higher than that among men; the number of registered unemployed increased faster among women than men; and the re-employment rate among women was much lower than that among men.

**Cambodia:** 30 per cent of male-dominated construction jobs disappeared between January and November 2009; and as many as 63,000 – mostly female – garment workers, or 18 per cent of the total garment workforce, lost their jobs in the eight months to May 2009.

**Philippines:** most lay-offs were in export processing zones, where typically 75 per cent of workers are women.

**Thailand:** at least 125,700 women in four export industries were laid off or moved from decent work to more irregular employment.

Many workers were not dismissed outright, but instead had their wages and hours cut. Trends towards 'labour market flexibilization' or informalization did not start with the economic crisis, but some factory owners took the opportunity to accelerate them. For example, in Indonesia and Thailand, factories tended to use the crisis as an opportunity to dismiss older women and long-serving staff and replace them with younger workers on a variety of more flexible, lower paid arrangements including short-term contracts, apprenticeships, and outsourcing.

Source: Green et. al. 2010. Pp. 16-17; also [http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2009-11/26/content\\_18956967.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2009-11/26/content_18956967.htm) (accessed 7 Feb. 2011).

#### 3.1. Women workers: the buffer workforce in good and bad times

The manner and severity of the crisis transmission was profoundly different for women and men. Gender inequalities that long pre-date the crisis underlie the inequalities arising specifically from the crisis and also explain why women shouldered the brunt of the impacts – both the first-round impacts in terms of unemployment and underemployment and the knock-on effects on informal employment, and the second-round impacts on intra-household dynamics and coping strategies. Traditional gender norms, labour market segregation

and unbalanced power relations and access to skills and resources have all led to women as the “buffer workforce” – within labour markets they are treated as flexible and expendable workers, and within households as “added workers” or “secondary earners” – but women themselves have few buffers against economic crises and the range and effectiveness of their buffers have been inadequate.

The job loss impact in Asia was severe because the labour-intensive export sectors were doubly vulnerable – in terms of both the sectors’ share of exports which fell sharply and the high quantity but low quality of jobs (including lack of social protection) in these sectors. Exports declined drastically in textiles, apparel and clothing, leather and footwear and electronics – industries which employ at least 75 per cent female workforce. Other female-dominated sectors including tourism and related services, such as hotels and restaurants, massage shops, beauty parlours, souvenir shops, were also badly affected.<sup>19</sup> Male workers were not spared as the male-dominated sectors, such as automobiles and auto parts and construction, were also hard hit. Several Asian countries also experienced layoffs in financial services, ICT-based back office services and telemarketing – the sex composition in these sectors is fairly equal (Sirimanne 2009, p. 6)

Asian women workers were the earliest and most serious casualties, mainly because they serve as a flexible, buffer workforce in global supply chains. In economic downturns, they were the first to lose their jobs because shedding these casual, temporary or contract workers is easier and less costly than dismissing regular staff. Women in the home-based informal economy end of supply chains were the most vulnerable to losing work because producers and suppliers pass the pressures of falling demand and heightened competition down the chain and cut off home-based outworkers rather than their permanent employees, or reduce rates for home-based piece work (Chhibber et.al. 2009, p. 69).

Table 3.1 shows that unemployment, including female rates, in developed Asian countries, such as Japan and Singapore, increased more than in developing Asian countries. On the other hand, the female unemployment rate fell in 2009 from 2008 in South-East Asia and the Pacific, while it remained stable in South Asia as compared to an increase in the rate for South Asian men. However, unemployment rates do not provide a complete or representative of the crisis impacts because:

- Gender norms (that men are “breadwinners” and women “secondary earners” of the family) often lead to unequal treatment of men and women in terms of dismissals, job retention, payment of benefits or rehiring. Such practices were observed during the Asian financial crisis (Horton and Mazumdar 2001) and also in the recent crisis (Praparpun 2010, Green et. al. 2010);

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<sup>19</sup> Both tourist arrivals and tourist receipts decelerated sharply in 2008 compared to 2007 for most countries. In Viet Nam, for instance, the number of tourists for the first eleven months of 2009 contracted by some 16.2 per cent as compared to the same period in 2008; 3 per cent of the total employed female workforce relied on the tourism-related sector of hotels and restaurants as compared to 1.4 per cent of male workers (Vietnam Institute of Labour Science and Social Affairs 2010).

*The job loss impact in Asia was severe because the labour-intensive export sectors were doubly vulnerable*

*Asian women workers were the earliest and most serious casualties*

*Unemployment rates do not tell the whole story*

- Official unemployment data are notoriously inadequate for understanding the labour market situation in developing countries, and more so for understanding gender differentials especially since more women would have been pressured to enter the workforce to make up for lost male earnings;
- Unemployment data cover only the formal sector which is only a small part of the labour market in many developing Asian economies. Importantly, most women who lost their jobs, like their male counterparts, could not afford not to work and had to find alternative sources of livelihood in the informal economy;
- Those who did not lose their jobs often faced seriously deteriorating labour conditions, as illustrated in Text Box 3.2, further exacerbating their vulnerabilities.

**Table 3.1. Unemployment rates by region, country, sex, 2000-2009 (% of labour force)**

Region/Country	Male				Female			
	2000	2007	2008	2009	2000	2007	2008	2009
World	6.1	5.4	5.5	6.2	6.6	6.0	6.0	6.5
East Asia	5.0	4.3	4.9	5.0	3.8	3.2	3.6	3.7
South-East Asia and the Pacific	5.0	5.2	5.2	5.2	4.9	5.7	5.5	5.2
South Asia	4.4	4.2	3.9	4.1	4.6	5.3	5.1	5.1
ASEAN	5.1	5.2	5.2	5.5	4.9	5.8	5.6	5.9
Brunei Darussalam	..	3.1	3.6	..	..	8.7	9.0	..
Cambodia	..	..	1.5	..	..	..	1.8	..
Indonesia	7.2	8.1	7.6	..	9.6	10.8	9.7	..
Malaysia	3.0	3.1	3.2	..	3.1	3.4	3.7	..
Philippines	10.9	7.5	7.6	..	9.9	7.0	7.1	..
Singapore	..	3.7	3.6	5.4	..	4.3	4.4	6.5
Thailand	2.4	1.3	1.3	1.2	2.3	1.1	1.0	1.1
Viet Nam	2.4	2.4	..	..	2.1	2.5	..	..
Japan	4.9	3.9	4.1	5.3	4.5	3.7	3.8	4.8
Republic of Korea	5.0	3.7	3.6	4.1	3.6	2.6	2.6	3.0
India	4.4	..	..	..	4.1	..	..	..

Sources: ILO 2010b, Table A.4 and ILO 2011, Table A2.

### Text Box 3.2

#### Deteriorating labour conditions for women workers

To understand the financial and human impact of the global economic downturn on workers in the garment sector, which was hardest hit by the global crisis, the ILO and UNDP collaborated with the Cambodia Institute of Development Study on a comprehensive tracking survey of 2,000 workers – 90 per cent of them female and 95 per cent migrants. The benchmarking survey conducted from September to December 2009 asked the 1,200 garment workers who were still employed (the other 800 respondents were recently laid off workers) to compare the situation in 2009 with that in 2008. The hardships they had encountered since January 2009 were listed as:

- **Reduced overtime** and as a consequence **reduction of effective income,**
- **Reduction of regular working hours** in the form of compulsory paid leave, work suspensions, shorter working week, compulsory unpaid leave;
- **Difficulty in taking days off** compared to before. This could reflect the fact that due to layoffs, employers had less flexibility and found it harder to adjust their production process;
- **Deterioration of safety and health services at the factory,** including fewer functional bathrooms in the factory; worse ventilation with no air conditioning; and less medicine disbursed at the factory's clinic;
- **Delays in salary payments and no or less bonuses;**
- **Decline in income,** which was identified as the most severe hardship experienced by the workers;
- **Lacking sufficient resources to cover basic needs.** More than half reported having difficulties covering food expenses, financing children's education, transport and health care as compared to a year ago; and not having enough money for remittances to families back home. The majority also said they had **no savings** in the event of being laid off.

Source: Chandrarat and Darnet 2010a.

### 3.2. Women agricultural workers buffeted by unstable prices and increasing costs

The impact of the global crisis on agriculture had important implications for women workers, given their high dependence on the sector (as shown in Table 2.4 in the previous Chapter). In South Asia, for instance, a much larger share of women (71 per cent) work in the agricultural sector relative to men (46 per cent) and are much more likely to be in low-productivity, subsistence activities rather than commercial agriculture.

Global agricultural prices rose dramatically between late 2006 and mid-2008 but many small farmers were not able to take advantage of higher prices because they are still net consumers of food or are not well integrated into markets. They are often “price takers” who sell through middlemen and may have only one buyer for their produce who can dictate the price. Farm workers were even less likely to benefit from higher prices. Even if their employers were benefitting, it was unlikely the gains were passed on in the form of higher wages.

While the prices of major agricultural commodities declined quite sharply from their peak in mid-2008, input prices continued to increase. The oil price hikes of 2008 were translated into higher fertilizer and pesticide prices and increased costs of transportation of crops, use of machinery and other inputs. Further increases and shocks in agricultural prices are expected

in the future and have been recognized as a serious cause for concern (ILO 2011, pp. 25-26).

“All these difficulties are heightened in the case of women farmers, because in much of Asia (especially South Asia) lack of land titles and other recognition has tended to deprive them of benefits such as access to institutional credit, extension services, subsidized inputs, etc. They therefore tend to have higher costs of cultivation than their male counterparts, and less state protection. In turn they are also likely to be deprived of the benefits of any crisis relief packages in the absence of specific measures” (Chhibber et.al. 2009, p. 71).

The crisis also affected women in agriculture through: heightened competition as retrenched workers return to rural areas where livelihood opportunities are already scarce; and reduction of remittances from urban areas and overseas resulting not only in reduced consumption for rural households but also reduced inputs to agriculture and consequent declines in productivity and production.

### 3.3. International women migrant workers less likely to have lost jobs

Initial reports indicated that internal and international migrant workers and associated remittances would be among the first casualties of the crisis. But the number of migrants losing jobs, the reversal of migration flows back to rural areas and countries of origin, and the fall in remittances were not as serious as predicted, and the patterns were complex. A key reason was the gender dimensions of labour migration.

*Among rural-to-urban migrants, women were heavily affected by the job losses and deteriorating labour conditions in the labour-intensive export processing zones and the tourist industry, while men were affected by the fall in construction jobs*

As migrants, they were typically denied the residence-based socio-economic rights that governments in the region recognise, even when they were employed. When they lost their jobs, they were forced either to stay in precarious conditions in the urban areas, or go back to their places of origin. In some countries, there is evidence that remittances from internal migrants dropped.<sup>20</sup> Female migrants, who are far more likely than their male counterparts to send remittances home and typically send a greater proportion of their earnings, were all too conscious of what reduced remittances would mean for their parents and families in the villages, particularly their ability to afford food and education for their children. Therefore, many who lost their factory jobs stayed on in the city in search of alternative income sources in the informal economy, including in precarious, exploitative and abusive

<sup>20</sup> Before the global financial and economic crisis hit Cambodia, about 360,000 mostly young female workers were employed in garment factories around Phnom Penh; about 270,000 mostly young male workers earned their living from construction sites across the country; and another 70,000 workers engaged in tourism related industries. There are no exact figures of how much these migrant workers send home each month, but a study by CDRI found that 93 per cent of them remitted money home. On average, a migrant worker sent about US\$20 home. According to these figures, internal migrants sent home about US\$150 million per year to rural Cambodia or about 8 per cent of the total income of rural households. As a result of the crisis, it was estimated that about 20 to 30 per cent of workers lost their jobs since late 2008 resulting in a loss of between US\$30 million to US\$45 million in the form of remittances with the corresponding impact on household incomes (Praparpun 2010, p. 19).

sex work. Some received reverse remittances of money and rice from rural families to keep them afloat while they searched for other jobs. They did not return en masse to their villages.<sup>21</sup>

In Viet Nam, it was reported that those migrants who returned to rural areas often could not find work because households did not have sufficient productive land and agricultural incomes were already too small. Many then returned to the cities and even more household members migrated internally in search of ways to contribute to family income (Green et.al. 2010, p. 19). In Cambodia, the decline in earnings of those who were still working in garment factories and the loss of remittances from the unemployed both produced an “added worker” effect, in which households sent another family member out to find additional income; typically the added worker is a sister aged 16–28 years (Chandararot and Dannet 2010a).

International labour migration is highly gendered, with male migrants going mainly into the construction and manufacturing sectors and female migrants concentrated in “feminized” service occupations in domestic work, care giving and nursing and in the entertainment industry. A key characteristic of Asian international labour migration has been the strong feminization of the flows.<sup>22</sup> Job opportunities for male migrants tend to be linked to the business cycle, so that many lost their jobs as construction dried up and contracts in manufacturing were terminated or not renewed.

“By contrast, the care activities dominantly performed by women workers tend to be affected by other variables such as demographic tendencies, institutional arrangements, and the extent to which women work outside the home in the host country. So employment in such activities is often relatively invariant to the business cycle, or at least respond to a lesser extent” (Chhibber et.al. 2009, p. 40-41). The “global care chain” has remained resilient to the crisis – women migrants leave their own dependents in the care of other family members to work as caregivers in other countries. This phenomenon has perpetuated inequitable gender division of care responsibilities.

No female labour exporting country reported any large scale return of migrant workers, even though there was a slowdown in the outflow of new migrants. For instance, Sri Lanka reported a 2 per cent fall in total departures for foreign employment in 2009 as compared to 2008, but among the migrant workers, the number of housemaids actually increased

*Jobs for international women migrants less affected by the crisis*

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<sup>21</sup> A survey conducted in May 2009 in four provinces in Viet Nam to assess the impact of the crisis on the rural population found that 21.7 per cent of migrant workers had been retrenched and returned home. Of the returning migrants, those retrenched from industrial processing zones and handicraft villages accounted for 36.9 per cent. Only 11.3 per cent of these retrenched workers found new employment including 5.3 per cent who found jobs in agriculture and 6 per cent who were re-employed in the industry or services sectors (Vietnam Institute of Labour Science and Social Affairs 2010, pp. 33-34). Another survey of garment factory workers (90 per cent female and 95 per cent migrants) in Cambodia who had become unemployed found that only 12.5 per cent had returned home (Chandararot and Dannet 2010a, p. 55).

<sup>22</sup> For example, the percentage of females among Indonesian workers abroad was 78 per cent in 2007 (Sukamdi 2008, p. 328).

by 4.7 per cent as compared to the declines of 13.2 per cent and 17.4 per cent respectively for the male dominated categories of unskilled and middle skilled migrant workers (Ruhunage 2010, p. 5).

*Remittances also proved remarkably resilient*

Remittances also proved remarkably resilient, especially for those countries of origin with relatively large shares of female migrants, such as the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. Indeed, remittances into the Philippines continued to increase each year between 2007 and 2009 (Asis 2010, pp. 4-5), and Sri Lanka had an increase of 14 per cent in 2009 as compared to 2008 (Ruhunage 2010, p. 7). In 2010 remittance flows to South Asia grew by 10.3 per cent and to East and South-East Asia and the Pacific by 6.4 per cent (World Bank, 2010).

*Women migrant workers less likely to have lost jobs but more vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and abuse*

These data should not, however, be interpreted to mean that female migrant workers were “better off”. It is common knowledge that women migrant workers are much more vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and abuse relative to male migrant workers and also native-born women – not only by employers but also by a host of both legal and illegal migration intermediaries,<sup>23</sup> and when they are undocumented, irregular or illegal they are even more at risk of being trafficked into forced or bonded labour. The “feminized occupations” where the demand for migrant workers remained strong offer notoriously poor conditions and little or no labour and social protection; the crisis would certainly have added to their vulnerability.

There is justified concern that women migrant workers were forced to accept even poorer terms and conditions of employment; to be victims of xenophobic and discriminatory reactions of nationals against migrant workers; and were even more cut off from labour and social protection. Since many women and their families went into debt to obtain overseas employment and because opportunities for gainful work at home are extremely bleak, they tried to stay on in the host countries even if it meant accepting jobs well below their skill levels or in the entertainment industry and prostitution. Women who were desperate to keep their jobs or find new jobs became more vulnerable not only to economic but also sexual exploitation and abuse and physical violence.

### **3.4. Women informal workers suffered disproportionately from the crisis**

Early concern with the impact of the economic crisis focused heavily on those employed in the formal economy, so that the impact measures dealt mainly with layoffs, job losses, unemployment rates and the conditions in formal employment. But official unemployment is an inadequate measure of the impact of the crisis in developing Asia; most male and female workers who lost their jobs could not afford to be unemployed. There was an influx of workers into the informal economy although at the same time there were downturns within the informal economy.

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<sup>23</sup> An important reason for the feminization of Asian labour migration has been the growth of an “immigration industry”. Recruitment agents, employment promoters, manpower suppliers and a host of other legal and illegal intermediaries have facilitated migration but they are also the very cause of the vulnerability of women migrants. They often charge exorbitant fees and exploit the women’s relationship of dependence on them.

An important reason for the lack of attention is a common belief is that the flexible nature of the informal economy allows it more easily to cope with the shocks of economic downturns, expanding and providing alternatives for those who have lost their jobs in the formal sector, thereby serving as a “cushion” for the formal economy. Evidence from earlier crises appeared to support this belief. For example, during the financial crisis in the late 1990s the informal economy expanded in many Asian countries (ILO 2002a, p. 30). But even then, “the swelling of the informal economy during the financial crisis reflects the ‘growth of more marginal economic activities and involvement of increased number of workers with lower average productivity and income’” (ibid).

In the current crisis, evidence confirmed that “the informal sector’s ‘resilience’ to downturns is a myth. It has not cushioned the impact of the economic crisis” (UN 2009a, p. 1). Employment in the informal economy may rise during economic crises “but this does not necessarily mean that traditional informal workers or new entrants are thriving. In reality, global economic downturn threatens to erode the fragile economic and social position of these workers, who often have slim margins for survival in the best of times. These effects tend to be particularly severe for informally employed women, who are overrepresented among low-end segments of the informal economy” (Horn 2009b, p. 170).

### Text Box 3.3

#### Increased numbers and increased hardships in the informal economy

##### **Indonesia:**

“In one focus group, women who were employed full time were all also undertaking work in the informal sector to pay for household expenses, including collecting plastic glasses, trading small birds, trading school uniforms, singing in small bars, or engaging in prostitution. They also reported reduced income from the informal sector due to increased competition. Other informants noted seeing an increase in informal workers on the streets. Some of them experienced an increased labour burden as they took on more work to make ends meet, either due to increasing prices or reduced income”.

##### **The Philippines:**

“The labour burden on women has increased in the face of the crisis, as they are forced to evolve ‘alternatives’ to cushion the blow of poverty. This is borne out by stories told in the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) by participants who said they have had to take on ‘second jobs’ or ‘sidelines’ and other alternative income sources that will bridge the family from one day to the next.....It is up to the woman to ensure that there is food on the table and that the most immediate needs of the household – water and healthcare – are met. For this, she has come up with ingenious ways of producing the money needed to buy sustenance”.

##### **Cambodia:**

“Fewer urban jobs equates to fewer remittances sent home to rural areas, where 80 per cent of Cambodians live. One and a half million rural people depend upon migrant remittances (mostly from women) as their major source of income. Early indications show that many unemployed workers are returning to their villages, where livelihood opportunities outside subsistence agriculture are severely limited. To survive, more and more Cambodian women and children may find themselves in the informal economy for lower wages, poorer conditions, and greater risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking”.

##### **Viet Nam:**

“Low-paid migrant workers are finding their own strategies to survive since employment has become uncertain and somewhat hopeless.... 25 per cent of those migrants returned home in the first quarter of 2009. Others remain in urban areas to seek available jobs on a temporary basis. Some skilled workers are finally accepting supplementary, low-paid and less productive jobs, such as garbage picking or odd jobs on the street. In some cases, they work part-time (reduced work hours or overtime payment) and take the opportunity to return to study or to enrol in a training course. With inadequate education and lower skills development, a large number of female workers are exploited. Most of them have been recently forced to become temporary employees with very low wages.”

##### **India:**

“Self-employed women face several constraints that prevent them from expanding their work into successful enterprises. These constraints have only become more magnified since the crisis. The major problems that they face are (i) poor access to credit, which has almost dried up after the crisis; (ii) low level of infrastructure support; (iii) poor access to markets, especially after the crisis; and (iv) inadequate support in technical up-gradation, skill training, etc.”

Sources: Praparpun 2010 for the South-East Asian countries; and UNDP India 2009a for India.

Field studies in a number of Asian countries paint a picture of:

- A burgeoning, increasingly over-crowded informal economy with heightened competition – mainly because both men and women retrenched workers and formal wage earners engaged in informal activities to compensate for falling incomes and purchasing power;
- More women, especially the young and the elderly, newly entered the labour market and took up informal employment as “added workers” in a family survival strategy;
- Employers further informalized jobs and turned to cheaper workers as a coping strategy for the crisis;
- Those still working experienced a decline in employment status from “regular” to “casual” and “temporary” employment or a change in location of work from factory-based to home-based; implying increased insecurity in work; and deskilling of work, as a number of skilled workers were forced to shift to manual or unskilled work;
- Deterioration of already poor conditions within the informal economy as a direct consequence of falling demand and rising costs caused by the crisis and indirect consequence of intensified competition caused by the increased numbers of workers;
- Small producers, who have always lacked adequate support in technology and skills, credit and infrastructure and who have low staying power, faced a severe liquidity crunch as well as a decline in business;
- More and more workers competed for their “sliver of a shrinking informal economy pie” and experienced cuts in their already meagre incomes<sup>24</sup>.

Informal workers, both men and women, were affected by the crisis in many of the same ways as formal workers. But informal workers were affected more severely than formal workers because they had no social protection, had to contend with increased competition as retrenched formal workers entered the informal economy and as more jobs were informalized, and received no or very limited support from public authorities. And women informal workers were hardest hit. Text Box 3.3 illustrates some of the dynamics of women’s participation in the informal economy in the context of the crisis, while Text Box 3.4 highlights the crisis impact transmission channels and identifies why women in informal employment suffered disproportionately.

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<sup>24</sup> Horn, Z.E. 2009a. No cushion to fall back on: The global economic crisis and informal workers, Synthesis report, WIEGO Inclusive Cities Project.

Horn, Z. 2009b. “No cushion to fall back on: The impact of the global recession on women in the informal economy in four Asian countries” in A. Bauer; M. Thant (eds.): Poverty and sustainable development in Asia: Impact and responses to the global economic crisis (Manila, ADB).

### Text Box 3.4

#### Why women informal workers in the region were harder hit than men by the crisis

The reasons why the impacts of the global economic crisis were harsher for women than for men in the informal economy include the following:

- **Overrepresentation in the most vulnerable segments of the informal economy:** “In the informal economy, women are concentrated in the poorest-paying and lowest barrier-to-entry sectors and subsectors where the impacts and competition have been strongest” (Horn 2009b, p. 178);
- **Limited employment alternatives:** Personal, social or economic marginalization leaves women with few choices for finding additional or other work. Women may face cultural constraints to work outside the home; they may have specialized skills but find few alternatives that allow them to utilize their skills; and certainly they face much greater constraints than men in starting up micro enterprises;
- **Unequal competition:** Men tend to have more resources (networks, skills and savings) at their disposal and are better able to identify alternative income earning opportunities;
- **Increased competition:** New entrants into the informal economy were mainly women.<sup>25</sup> Increased competition was “undermining the livelihoods of the traditional informal workforce and the ability of new entrants to find shelter in the informal economy. Contrary to a common assumption, there is no ‘cushion’ in – much less a cushion for – the informal economy, only an increasing number of firms or individuals competing for ever-decreasing slices of a shrinking pie” (Horn, 2009a, p. 14);
- **The working poor:** Women informal workers were working hard and long hours but not earning enough to support themselves and their families. With more and more workers competing for their “sliver of a shrinking informal economy pie” and cuts in their already meagre incomes, the near poor became the new poor, and there was further impoverishment of the working poor;
- **Exacerbated dependency:** An important reason for women’s vulnerability was their dependence on middlemen and contractors, especially if they were home-based and at the bottom rungs of supply chains. With the crisis, economic stress was shifted down the chain and losses transferred disproportionately to informal workers. With little or no bargaining power women were even more dependent on middlemen and contractors for whatever orders and prices were offered to them;
- **Decline in employment status:** Women also experienced a decline in their status from “regular paid employees” in informal enterprises to casual and temporary employment, intensifying their job insecurity. Desperate to keep their jobs, women were more vulnerable not only to economic but also sexual exploitation, abuse and violence;
- **Greater difficulties accessing credit:** Even before the crisis, women faced greater difficulties than men in obtaining credit from commercial banks. With the crisis, credit from micro-finance institutions was squeezed and credit from non-institutional sources became more precarious, difficult and expensive. Yet more than ever women needed credit for both their productive and reproductive costs;
- **Longer working hours:** Many women worked longer hours, often in more than one job, to compensate for falling incomes. But longer working hours placed additional stress on women who were already struggling to balance productive and reproductive responsibilities;
- **Neglect in economic stimulus packages and safety nets:** Policy-makers and the media primarily focused on the formal economy although the real economy in many Asian countries is the informal economy. Furthermore, “few governments have made conscious effort to use a gender perspective in designing these stimulus packages or safety nets” (Hung 2009, p. 15).

<sup>25</sup> 60 per cent of interviewees in research conducted by the WIEGO Inclusive Cities Project on the impact of the crisis on the informal economy in 10 developing countries reported more workers in their local occupation and believed that the new entrants were mostly women.

### 3.5. The “lived human experience” of crisis was harsher on women

How households adjusted to the impact of the crisis, how shocks affected the reproduction of everyday life, including the material and non-materials aspects of well-being, the coping strategies and resilience of families, all underscore the significance of pre-existing gender inequalities. Because women bear the bulk of reproductive responsibilities, they also bore the brunt of household adjustment and coping strategies. Text Box 3.5 points out why these were harsher for women than for men. Although often labelled “coping strategies”, the means women find to respond to the crisis are unsustainable, and are more appropriately conceived of as “desperation measures” (King and Sweetman 2010, p. 11).

#### Text Box 3.5

##### Gendered household adjustment and coping strategies

Underlying gender inequalities in the household – with women responsible for putting food on the table, putting children through school, taking care not only of children but also aged or disabled family members, safeguarding the health of the family, etc. – resulted in:

- **The “added worker” phenomenon**, with more women, especially young women and older women, taking up “distress informal employment”, often in whatever activity would earn some income for their families to survive;
- **Longer hours in both paid and unpaid work.** Women’s time burden increased as they worked longer hours to compensate for falling incomes or travelled further to find work, and at the same time took on more unpaid work such as sourcing cheaper food and also caring work for weaker family members especially where social services were cut;
- **Reductions in the quantity and quality of food consumed**, with women often sacrificing their food consumption for the men and children in the family;
- **Efforts to keep children in school** but at the cost of eating less, selling assets or spending less on health. Where children were taken out of school, it was most likely the girls for reasons that included their assumed greater suitability to take on their mother’s reproductive work and the perceived greater return on investment in boys’ education;
- **Worsening gender inequities in the distribution of household resources.** Where households were forced into distress sales of their reserve assets, women’s were more vulnerable than men’s. Women’s stocks of social capital (for example, their social networks, which potentially offer support and mutual help) were eroded especially as they had no time to nurture these relationships;
- **Greater incidence of psychological stress and domestic violence:** In many focus group discussions, women mentioned experiencing increased anxiety and disruptions in sleeping patterns, worrying about their inability to care for the family. Domestic violence increased as the greater insecurities of daily existence led more men to drink and to take their frustrations out on the womenfolk.

### 3.6. Strong economic recovery but vulnerabilities persist

“More jobs were available with new factories opening in export manufacturing outside Jakarta and the readymade garments export industry in Bangladesh. The recovery of the rubber price had boosted the local economy in the rubber-producing community in South Kalimantan in Indonesia. Knock-on effects in the local economies were being seen in local trade and services. Compared to the first quarter of 2009, people in these communities on the

*By 2010, the “palpable sense of crisis” had receded in Asian countries*

frontline of the global economy were more optimistic, less stressed, more secure in their livelihoods, and materially better-off than a year ago”.<sup>26</sup>

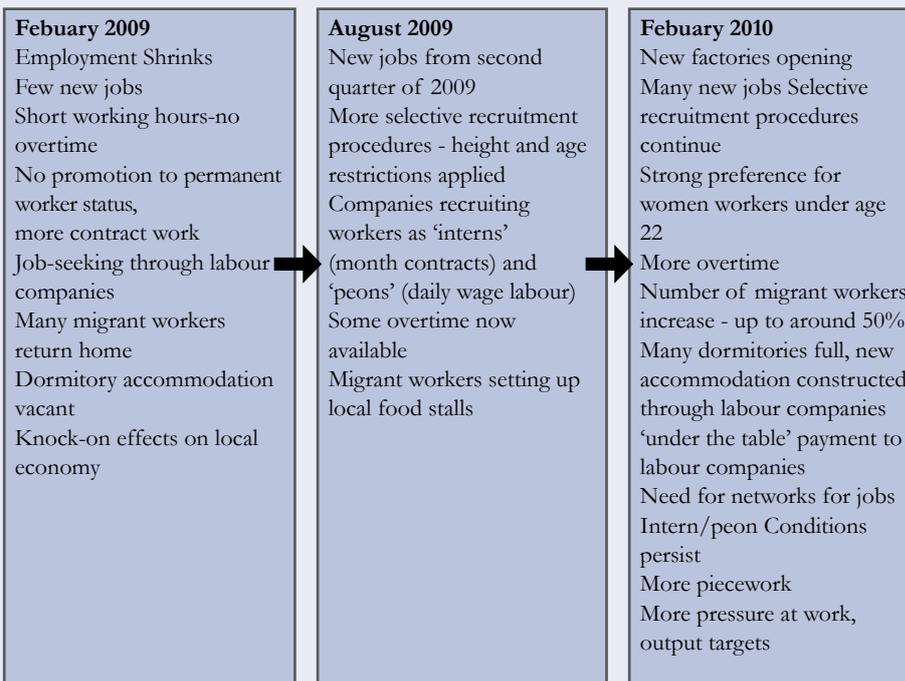
How different male- and female-dominated occupational groups in Bangladesh fared in the local recovery is summarized in Text Box 3.6. What the table highlights is that while conditions had improved, the recovery was still fragile for most workers, and especially for informal workers their vulnerabilities were far from over.

<b>Text Box 3.6</b> <b>Crisis and recovery in Bangladesh: different impacts on different livelihoods</b>	
<b>Occupational group</b>	<b>Direction of change and explanation, 2009-2010</b>
Farmers	↑ Cultivating more land this year because fertilizer and seed prices are down
Agricultural labourers	↑ Wages have not increased since 2009, but more days of work available
Van driver (rural)	↑ Always a good occupation, but good harvest means more transport work
Rice trader (rural)	↑ Took some big hits because of fluctuating prices in 2009, but more stable and predictable prices better
Garment workers	↑ More and more stable job opportunities, less conflict over payment of wages, bonuses and lay-offs than in 2009
Electrician (urban)	↑ Many more slum dwellers connected to electricity than a year ago, many more televisions, hence growing demand
Rickshaw pullers (urban)	↑ Less conflict over fares, fares slightly increased, more people using rickshaws
Housemaids (urban)	↔ Wages increased since 2008 price hikes, but this has merely meant they have broken even
Day labourers (urban)	↔ Wages increased since 2008 price hikes, but this has merely meant they have broken even
Waste traders (urban)	↓ 2008 was a year of exceptionally high profits as prices for scrap metal and other recycled materials were extremely high. Recycled waste profits took a hit in 2009, and profits have come down greatly
Vegetable trader (rural)	↓ Vast profits were made in 2009 when vegetable prices were sky high, last year they did not do so well when prices came down
Waste pickers (urban)	↓ As waste traders were earning lower profits from the recycling centres, they paid lower rates to waste pickers (mainly children)

Source: Hossain et. al. 2010, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> These findings are from community-level qualitative research conducted between February and April 2010 to follow up on research conducted in early 2009 in ten communities, including one urban and one rural location each in Bangladesh and Indonesia (Hossain et.al. 2010, p. v).

**Text Box 3.7**  
**Reported changes in export sector employment in Indonesia 2009-2010**



Source: Hossain et. al. 2010, p.

In the formal sector garment factories, which have been major employers of women, the recovery appeared to have taken hold, with signs of increased employment and improvements in the bargaining power and conditions of workers. In Bangladesh, workers explained that the larger companies that were buying up the failed units were better employers – wages and overtime paid regularly, benefits and bonuses provided. Some factories employing local people were also selling subsidised rice to factory workers. The manufacturers’ association was also believed to have become stricter about labour regulations, and workers reported cases where workers who were fired unjustifiably and without being paid owed salary successfully sought compensation.

Garments workers felt that industrial action that peaked at the height of the global economic crisis had contributed to greater responsiveness to workers’ demands by factory owners (Hossain et. al. 2010, p. 12). In Viet Nam too, “as the orders picked up, many enterprises suffered labour shortages in July–August 2009. This has forced some enterprises to provide incentives to attract new workers, including welfare incentives and reducing their age and education requirements. At the same time, migrants are seeking more information before applying for work and many are opting to attend vocational schools” (Green et.al. 2010, p. 17). On the other hand, some of the discriminatory and exploitative practices persist. Text Box 3.7 shows that the recovery was increasing the quantity but not the quality of jobs for women in the export sector in Indonesia.

*Economic recovery not matched by labour market recovery, gender inequities still a primary concern*

The January 2011 International Monetary Fund (IMF) *World Economic Outlook Update* confirms that Asia is leading the world in a strong economic recovery from the global economic crisis. In 2010, Developing Asia grew by 9.3 per cent, fueled by the People's Republic of China's growth of 10.3 per cent, India's growth of 9.7 per cent and ASEAN's (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam) growth of 6.7 per cent. The Newly Industrialized Asian economies grew by 8.2 per cent. By comparison, world output increased by 5.0 per cent. The projections are that growth will continue to be robust in 2011 especially in Developing Asia.

**Table 3.2. Unemployment rates by region and sex, 2008-2010**

Region	2007		2008		2009		2010*	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
World	5.4	6.0	5.5	6.0	6.2	6.5	6.0	6.5
East Asia	4.3	3.2	4.9	3.6	5.0	3.7	4.6	3.5
South-East Asia & Pacific	5.2	5.7	5.2	5.5	5.2	5.2	5.0	5.2
South Asia	4.2	5.3	3.9	5.1	4.1	5.1	4.0	4.9

Source: ILO 2011, Table A2.  
\* Preliminary estimate for 2010.

The 2010 preliminary estimates shown in Table 3.2 indicate some positive labour market developments in that unemployment declined from 2009 to 2010. But in East Asia, while the unemployment rate for men was estimated to have fallen to 4.6 per cent in 2010 from 5.0 per cent in 2009, the unemployment rate changed little for women and was still higher than the 2007 rate (ILO 2011, p. 39). Gender gaps variances between 2007 and 2010 were also inconsistent between regions and years, not demonstrating any clear trend. And youth unemployment remains a major challenge. In the Republic of Korea, young women and men are 2.5 times more likely than adults to be unemployed; in Hong Kong, China the ratio is 4.4 times (ibid).

In South-East Asia and the Pacific, the female unemployment rate was estimated to have remained unchanged while that of males dropped slightly. Despite the strong economic rebound, employment grew by only 1.7 per cent in 2010, mainly in the services sector. In Malaysia and Indonesia, for instance, the share of employment in services increased while that in manufacturing declined between 2007 and 2010. While such a trend may have been part of a longer-term structural shift, it could also reflect movement of workers to poorer quality, lower-paying jobs. In both these countries, labour productivity in manufacturing is significantly higher than in services. The trend is worrying, especially taken in conjunction with the increase in vulnerable employment over the period (ILO 2011, p. 44). In South Asia, unemployment rates fell slightly in 2010, but unemployment is not the main labour market challenge in the subregion. The primary concerns are still the huge gap in male-female labour force participation rates (around 43 percentage points); a youth unemployment rate of 20.7 per cent in the second quarter of 2010 (crucial in a region in which nearly 50 per cent of the population is below 30 years of age) and the highest rate of vulnerable employment among all regions in the world (ILO 2011, p. 46).

What is clear is that Asia's strong economic rebound has not been matched by gender-equitable recovery in the labour market. Although employment levels in many countries were higher in 2010 than a year earlier,

job quality and working poverty remain serious concerns – “much of the job growth likely occurred in the informal economy. Wage employment actually contracted and vulnerable employment grew by 9 per cent in the Philippines and 7.6 per cent in Sri Lanka while in Thailand the increase in vulnerable employment matched the increase in wage employment”. “Employment-related gender gaps persist; in wages the gap is significant; in terms of job quality it has probably increased, a factor of the expansion and feminization of informal employment” (ILO 2010a).

The process was already ongoing before the global economic crisis and accelerated during the crisis. Tracking surveys in 2010 reported increasing flexibilization and informalization, including preference to hire young and therefore cheaper women workers, and hiring contract and temporary workers. Such practices leave workers more vulnerable but firms more resilient. The informal economy continues to grow in the context of fragile recovery, still high unemployment rates and huge numbers of youth entering the labour force.

*The trend towards increasing flexibilization and informalization in the labour market is continuing*

## 4. Gender-responsive rebalancing

### 4.1. The gendered implications of “rebalancing”

The buzz word in Asian countries now is “rebalancing” towards a new and sustainable development trajectory. The main components of rebalancing have been identified as: the rebalancing of demand from public spending<sup>27</sup> to the revival of private investment and consumption; domestic-led growth of consumption and investments in place of export-led growth; preparing workers and businesses for green jobs and greener enterprises; and greater regional integration and trade (ILO 2010b, ADB 2009). We can surmise what some of the main gendered implications for Asian labour markets of these rebalancing components would likely be.

*The demographic context for rebalancing is important*

For the period 2011-2015, an average of 1 million young people will enter the labour market each year in South Asia, adding pressure to the over-saturated labour market. The number of young people entering the labour market in East Asia and South-East Asia and the Pacific is expected to decrease. But, as already emphasized, unemployment rates are three to four times higher for youth than for adults; with young women facing greater difficulties than young men to find jobs (refer back to Table 2.2). Youth unemployment rates are projected to fall in 2011, but the greater sensitivity of youth rates to the business cycle means the projected recovery of youth unemployment is more uncertain than that of adults as economic instability continues (ILO 2010e).

On the other hand, the population of many Asian countries is rapidly ageing. By 2020, the share of population aged 60 years and above will have risen to 16.9 per cent from 12.5 per cent in 2010 in East Asia, 11.6 from 8.6 per cent in South-East Asia and the Pacific, and 9.3 from 7.2 per cent in South Asia. More than a third of Japan’s population and more than a quarter of Singapore’s population would be above 60 years by 2020 (UN 2009b). The gender implications are several:

- Women consistently outlive men so that the share of women in the 60 and over age group will be higher. But gender inequalities in social protection mean that at the time of their lives when women need the most protection, they will be most vulnerable;
- Given that many older women cannot afford to “retire” and may not even wish to do so, it is all the more important to ensure that older women are not neglected in training programmes to enhance employability and productive ageing and that they have equal access as men to opportunities to extend working life; and
- There will be increasing demands for health services and care of the elderly, with related implications for employment opportunities for women. These female-dominated occupations will continue to grow and most likely be filled by migrant women.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Refer back to footnote 3 in Chapter 1 for the explanation of the “balance” between public spending and private sector investment and consumption

<sup>28</sup> As indicated in Text Box 4.1 below.

The public sector tends to be a better employer of women than the private sector and more likely to practise non-discrimination.<sup>29</sup> Private firms pressured by intensified competition may be more inclined to hire women as a “cheap labour”/“buffer” strategy. Increasing flexibilization and informalization practices particularly in the manufacturing sector have already been highlighted. On the other hand, an increasing number of companies are adopting corporate social responsibility practices and recognizing the “business case for hiring women”. Many multinational companies also tend to pay their workers, both men and women “decent wages”. But there is the danger that government efforts to promote private businesses may include relaxation of labour regulations. Cut-backs in public sector spending on social services will affect women more than men because of gender inequalities in reproductive responsibilities.

While jobs in manufacturing and construction have not recovered to pre-crisis levels, the education and health sectors added jobs through 2009 and 2010 and very likely will continue to do so (Zeballos and Garry 2010). These are important sectors for women’s employment and offer potentials for decent jobs. In Malaysia, women account for 65 per cent of the workforce in the education sector and 69 per cent of the workforce in health and social work. In Thailand, the comparable figures are 61 per cent in education and 75 per cent in health and social work.<sup>30</sup> Jobs have been growing in these sectors in part because there is an increasing trend towards privatization of education and health services.

Businesses in Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and India have been setting up private education and skills training colleges and “twinning education programmes” and promoting medical tourism. It is obviously critical to ensure that, on the one hand, women have equal opportunities with men to access these jobs and that, on the other hand, the privatization moves do not deny poor women and their families of essential services.

The rebalancing of Asian economies from export-led to domestic-led consumption growth will depend highly on the emergence and expansion of an Asian middle class. ADB estimated that developing Asia’s middle class, defined as those with the ability to spend between US\$2 and \$20 a day, grew more than threefold from 565 million in 1990 to 1.9 billion in 2008 or 56 per cent of total population (ADB 2010c, p. 6).<sup>31</sup> The “rise of Asia’s middle class” has hugely expanded purchases not only of consumer durables (sales of refrigerators, television sets, mobile phones, and automobiles have surged in virtually every country in recent years) but also of innovative and lower-priced products (such as India’s Nano car, battery-operated refrigerators and cheap mobile phone rates) and personal services (beauty parlours, gyms with personal trainers, health spas, insurance, banking, retail sales, restaurants, etc.).

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<sup>29</sup> For example, a key reason why the Philippines and Mongolia have an unusual pattern of a higher percentage of employed men working in informal non-agricultural jobs than employed women is the importance of the public sector as a source of formal employment for women (Heintz 2010, p. 11).

<sup>30</sup> Data from ILO Key indicators of the labour market database.

<sup>31</sup> At the same time ADB warned that since a large proportion of the “middle class” are at the lower end of the \$2-4 daily consumption bracket, they are at high risk of falling back into poverty in the event of any major economic shock.

Rising domestic consumption obviously offers new avenues for employment and entrepreneurship, but it is less obvious that these will necessarily improve gender equality and women's empowerment in the labour market. It can be expected that some of the personal service occupations will still be gender-typed and in the informal economy, with women doing the poorer quality, poorer paying jobs. In terms of manufacturing consumer products to meet the demands of the rising middle class, women are likely to continue to face various barriers relative to men, especially limited access to new technologies and market information, lack of credit, etc.

Two other considerations are also very important. Firstly, women have relied very heavily on labour-intensive export-oriented manufacturing for the bulk of non-agricultural employment – it remains to be seen whether domestic consumption will be able to compensate for a decline in exports and therefore in available jobs. Secondly, a sign of middle class affluence is the ability to have paid domestic help. The rise of the middle class has been accompanied by a rise in the number of domestic workers who are mainly migrants. For example, it has been reported that some 50,000 domestic helpers enter Malaysia every year, of which 80 per cent are women from Indonesia<sup>32</sup> – and these figures do not take into account the many more who are irregular or undocumented migrants. There are also other contributing factors, such as middle class women paying poorer women to take over their reproductive responsibilities while they take on other jobs in the labour market.

### *Green growth and green jobs*

Even before the crisis, Asian economies had been adopting various measures to conserve natural resources, reduce carbon emissions and be energy efficient. Recovery and rebalancing policies have included commitments to promote new green technologies and create new “green jobs”.<sup>33</sup> The gender implications are critical because:

- Climate change is not gender neutral. Women are more vulnerable than men to the effects of climate change because so many are poor and are proportionally more dependent on threatened natural resources;
- Women tend to play a greater role than men in natural resource management and in ensuring nutrition and care for their families. Responsibilities in households, communities and as stewards of natural resources position them well to be “change agents” in developing strategies for adapting to changing environmental realities;
- Therefore, green growth efforts potentially should benefit women more than men. Climate change adaptation or mitigation measures should improve the resilience of communities and people – especially women – who rely on climate-dependent resources for their livelihoods;<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> A. Chew: “No quick fix to maid shortage” in *The Star* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia), 16 Jan. 2011, <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2011/1/16/nation/7809522&sec=nation> (accessed 3 Feb. 2011).

<sup>33</sup> “Green jobs” are jobs that directly contribute to low-carbon development and adaptation to the impacts of climate change and that reduce the environmental impacts of enterprises and economic sectors ultimately to levels that are sustainable.

<sup>34</sup> “Green growth” is a policy focus for the Asia and Pacific region that emphasizes environmentally sustainable economic progress to foster low-carbon, socially inclusive development.

See: <http://www.greengrowth.org/> (accessed 15 Mar. 2011)

- However, the international instruments, the Kyoto Protocol and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) do not mention women or gender, and none of the existing climate change finance mechanisms respond to the specific needs of women (ILO 2009b). It is not at all obvious how a transition to new patterns of production, consumption and employment will differentially affect women and men;
- Unless the promotion of green jobs and green enterprises specifically mainstream gender considerations and women enjoy equal access with men to the necessary skills and technologies and there is just transition for workers who will lose their “old” jobs – existing patterns of gender disadvantage will persist or may even be magnified. Furthermore, “green jobs” do not automatically constitute decent work, whether for women or for men.<sup>35</sup>

Even before the crisis, trade, investment and financial flows had been increasingly intra-Asian. The crisis in the global economy, which started and still lingers in the western countries, has pushed Asian countries to accelerate regional integration measures. For instance, ASEAN countries have brought forward their economic, socio-cultural and security goals for an ASEAN Community from 2020 to 2015. They have also strengthened cooperation with the “+3 countries” (People’s Republic of China, Japan and Republic of Korea). But the integration and cooperation measures have been at the level of subregions in Asia, rather than covering Asia and the Pacific; and the overwhelming dominance of the People's Republic of China and India is a key factor. The implications for labour markets are evolving, wide-ranging and complex and would differ from country to country. There are two-edged forces, bringing both opportunities and constraints and creating both winners and losers.

*Deeper regional  
integration in Asia*

The most widely recognized argument in favour of regional integration is the benefit of expanded markets and promoting competition by eliminating barriers to trade among member countries. But it is less well recognized or acknowledged that these “benefits” do not necessarily translate into growth of decent employment especially for the disadvantaged segments of the labour force in the less developed member countries. Intensified competition to produce more efficiently (especially since many Asian developing countries have similar economic structures) may, in fact, push producers to put greater pressure on their workers (mainly female) in the labour-intensive export industries.

Moreover, women in the informal economy who dominate the lowest end of supply chains may not benefit from the expansion of regional markets unless there are specific efforts to connect them on decent terms to these markets. Also, female small producers and female labourers in agriculture may be further marginalized or impoverished by the liberalization of trade in agricultural products;

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<sup>35</sup> Evidence shows that many of the jobs currently related to the environment are “dirty, dangerous and difficult”. Employment in industries such as recycling and waste management – which are heavily dominated by women in the informal economy – do not represent decent work. The challenge will be to turn these jobs into quality jobs that contribute to environmental protection and improved conditions for the workers.

In addition, regional cooperation has not extended to the labour market and labour mobility. ASEAN cooperation, for example, covers only the movement of business people and skilled labour and talents. But the bulk of female migration within Asia is of those going into low-end jobs, which is likely to continue to grow, as seen in Text Box 4.1. Competition is leading source countries to offer cheaper and cheaper domestic workers (maids from Myanmar and Cambodia are paid less than Indonesian maids who are paid less than Filipino maids). Emigration/immigration restrictions in the face of growing demand is resulting in growing numbers of illegal migrants who are especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse at the hands of traffickers, unscrupulous agents and employers.

Of course, there are also new labour market opportunities with deeper regional integration; for instance, there has been a growing tourism trade among Asian countries and hugely expanding trade in e-commerce and information technology enabled services.<sup>36</sup> But again, whether women workers benefit will depend on which countries they are in; whether specific attention is given to promoting equitable access for women as for men to these new jobs (including training opportunities taking into account the new demands); and whether efforts are made to ensure decent working conditions in the new jobs (for example, female-dominated jobs in tourism-related services and in back-office processing are often not decent jobs).

#### **Text Box 4.1**

##### **Why the demand for female labour migrants is likely to increase**

The demand for female labour migrants especially as domestic workers, care-givers and other low-end jobs is likely to increase and be relatively unaffected by business cycles because of:

- Declining birth rates and a static or declining workforce in countries of employment that has drawn educated middle class women into the workforce;
- Ageing in high-income countries of employment where care of the elderly is relegated to institutions or home-based care-givers;
- Refusal by nationals in countries of employment to engage in domestic work or low-end manufacturing jobs as they are considered dirty, degrading and dangerous and because nationals have better jobs or enjoy social protection. This creates a demand for overseas women labour in these sectors;
- Prestige consciousness of the affluent in certain countries of employment creating the demand for foreign domestic workers as a status symbol.

Source: Frank and Spehar 2010, p. 29.

<sup>36</sup> Examples of such services include audiovisual and cultural services; business services such as mailing list management, telemarketing, remote secretarial services, back-office processes of billing, etc.; computer and related services, higher education and training services; financial services; health services including direct export of related services such as shipment of laboratory samples; internet related services; professional services and animation production (UNCTAD 2004, p. 150).

## 4.2. Gender-responsive rebalancing policies

It is obvious from the discussion above that rebalancing policies must, as a matter of “smart economics” and social justice, address gender inequality in the labour market. Rebalancing of the labour market to promote equal decent work opportunities and outcomes for women and men will effectively reduce poverty and promote transition to a new development trajectory that is rights-based, resilient, sustainable, just and inclusive. Gender-responsive rebalancing policies would be “smart economics” because, for instance, it has been estimated that if Japan’s 60 per cent female employment rate in 2009 could match the 80 per cent rate among men, the country would have 8.2 million more workers to replenish its rapidly ageing population and raise its gross domestic product by as much as 15 per cent.<sup>37</sup>

Before focusing on specific policies, it is useful to spell out some basic considerations for gender-responsive rebalancing:

- Rebalancing policies and strategies should mainstream gender equality considerations throughout, seek to change traditional gender norms that are keeping women as a “buffer workforce” and address both productive and reproductive roles of women and men;
- A rights-based approach is fundamental. The Resolution concerning gender equality at the heart of decent work adopted by the 98<sup>th</sup> Session of the International Labour Conference in 2009 underscored the importance of promoting women workers’ rights through comprehensive measures to eliminate biases/discrimination in existing law and policies. This involves enforcing legal frameworks through gender-balanced and gender-sensitive labour administrations, labour inspectorates and courts; strengthening institutions mandated to promote gender equality; and “rebalancing” productive and reproductive roles between women and men;
- Gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) should be part and parcel of all rebalancing efforts. To date, although more and more Asian countries have introduced GRB initiatives, they have applied to allocations targeting women and girls rather than mainstream budgets;
- Equal participation and representation of women and men in governance and decision-making processes and mechanisms in all the fields of rebalancing would help ensure more equitable outcomes;
- As a related and integral rebalancing, move workers and enterprises along the continuum from informality and decent work deficits to formality so that women and men have equal access to decent jobs and are recognized in the law and have rights, legal and social protection and representation and voice.

The G20 Labour and Employment Ministers’ Recommendations to G20 Leaders in April 2010 emphasized the critical importance of accelerating job creation to ensure sustained recovery and future growth and referred to the ILO Global Jobs Pact and Decent Work Agenda as valuable resources

*Some fundamentals  
of gender-responsive  
rebalancing*

*Gender responsive  
jobs-rich recovery and  
future growth*

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<sup>37</sup> H. Tabuchi: “Leading in 3-D TV, Breaking Japan’s Glass Ceiling”, in *The New York Times* (New York), 17 Jan. 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/18/business/global/18screen.html?\\_r=1&scsq=3&sq=japanese%20women&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/18/business/global/18screen.html?_r=1&scsq=3&sq=japanese%20women&st=cse) (accessed 24 Jan. 2011)

for designing such measures.<sup>38</sup> The Global Jobs Pact (ILO 2009c), which was unanimously adopted by all ILO constituents in June 2009, calls for “enforcement of rights to equality and non-discrimination (to) help vulnerable groups most hard hit by the crisis”, but the G20 Recommendations may have been gender-blind. For instance, they highlight employment generation through public work schemes for infrastructure construction – but such jobs tend to be heavily male-dominated.

Public employment programmes have been recognized as valuable not only for crisis response but as part of wider employment policy. Public employment programmes may be especially important in lower-income countries to tackle problems of persistent and high unemployment and underemployment and to help absorb the huge numbers of young women and men entering the workforce; they also have a triple win potential for tackling poverty, environment and gender issues. But public employment programmes have to be specifically and carefully and sensitively targeted to ensure they benefit the groups who need the programmes the most.<sup>39</sup> Gender-responsive measures in public employment programmes include:

- *Investing in innovative approaches to public employment programmes* – expanding public employment programmes beyond the traditional idea of public works in infrastructure construction to include employment guarantee programmes and work in the social sector, environmental services and multi-sectoral community-driven programmes (Liew-Kie-Song and Philip 2010). The National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme in India has given new meaning to the role of the state in creating a right to work and to non-discrimination between women and men (Text Box 4.2). Public employment programmes to deliver community assets and services, such as community-based health care, care for the elderly, early childhood development, would not only provide employment opportunities for women but would also relieve women of some of their reproductive responsibilities. Environmental protection components in public employment programmes would benefit entire communities;
- *Designing the public employment programmes taking into specific consideration socio-cultural norms of “appropriate work” for women and the constraints faced by women* – such as recruitment and information dissemination strategies to reach women in the target population; care in selecting the intermediary agency (construction companies often restrict women’s employment); keeping the location of work relatively close to the home; offering part-time work so that women are better able to combine their different productive and reproductive duties; providing childcare facilities; providing training for women to enable them to catch up with men in terms of skills needed for particular jobs.

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<sup>38</sup> United States Department of Labor: Bureau of International Labor Affairs, “G20 Labor and Employment Ministers’ Recommendations to G20 Leaders”, 21 April 2010, [http://www.dol.gov/ilab/media/events/G20\\_ministersmeeting/results.htm](http://www.dol.gov/ilab/media/events/G20_ministersmeeting/results.htm) (accessed 7 Feb. 2011)

<sup>39</sup> In the recent crisis, “in the Philippines, a day after a newspaper article reported the loss of 42,000 jobs in the female-dominated garments, semi-conductor, and electronics industries, the government responded by announcing the creation of 41,000 new jobs through government infrastructure projects. Although this stimulus was badly needed, the benefits will most likely accrue almost exclusively to men, even where women are bearing the disproportionate impact of job losses” (Emmett 2009, p. 9).

#### Text Box 4.2

##### India's National Rural Employment Guarantee and gender equality

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme (NREGP), renamed in October 2009 as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee (MGNREGP) makes 100 days of work per household a legal entitlement in rural areas and stipulates the reservation of at least one-third of jobs for women, equal wages for work of equal value and the provision of a crèche when there are more than five women on a programme. A recent study found that (a) women's participation in the NREGA has been increasing; (b) state-wise women's participation in the programme is positively correlated with women's participation in rural areas, though women's participation in NREGA is often higher than women's participation in other forms of recorded work so far; and (c) women's participation is negatively correlated with the existing gender wage gap in unskilled agricultural labour. The latter implies that where women's actual wages as a share of men's is lower in the private sector, women are flocking to work in this government administered programme. This will inevitably raise women's bargaining power, and is potentially a critical factor in reducing gender disparities in the labour market. The question of course is to what extent the implementation of the programme will adhere to the Guidelines and to what extent other considerations would influence the actual roll out of the programme in different state governments. The paper also finds that the achievements or outcomes of the NREGA as far as women are concerned are – as with any other government programme – mediated by the intervening institutions including both the gendered nature of the labour market and the efficacy or otherwise of the local government.

Source: Dasgupta and Sudarshan 2011 (forthcoming).

Most stimulus packages have included specific measures for SMEs. Even in good times, SMEs face various barriers and constraints relative to large firms and women face greater disadvantages and difficulties than men in operating SMEs. Yet SMEs have proved to be big employers<sup>40</sup> and to be more resilient than large firms in the crisis. The growth potential of enterprises is linked to access to and control over resources, including land, credit, technology, networks, information and markets. Women's limited access to each of these factors severely impairs the viability of their businesses, with the result that most women entrepreneurs are to be found in the smallest informal enterprises. The value of supporting women in SMEs is illustrated in Text Box 4.3. Measures to promote sustainable SMEs and women's entrepreneurship may be especially significant in the context of rebalancing towards domestic demand – female-operated SMEs could well cater to the demands of the rising middle class. Such measures include:

- Gender-sensitive provision of business development services. Entrepreneurship development programmes should be tailored to meet the specific needs and constraints of women, including those in the informal economy. Business advisory centres should ensure equal access to women and men so that they can identify market niches and grow their businesses (for instance, women may need assistance particularly to identify growth potentials in new green enterprises or agribusiness);

*Supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and promoting women's entrepreneurship*

<sup>40</sup> In Indonesia, for instance, SMEs account for just over half of GDP and about 95 per cent of employment (ILO 2010f, p. 8).

- Promotion of socially useful banking: “the emphasis on putting finance at the service of social goals needs to be extended throughout the banking system” (UNDP 2010, pp. 21-22). There has been a slew of efforts to regulate commercial banks “but there has less emphasis on creating/supporting large scale banks based on the “mutual” principle that they operate to the mutual benefit of depositors and borrowers and not to make profits for shareholders” (ibid). Women have a lot of experience with creation of small-scale self-organized savings and loan groups in their local neighbourhoods. Examples of socially useful banking include the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and the cooperative banks set up by SEWA in India for its members. Although access to microfinance is important for many poor women, it should be offered within a framework promoting access to formal financial services in the longer term and ensuring that the loans do not pull the women deeper into poverty (ILO 2009d, p. 119);
- A poor business environment affects all enterprises negatively but the adverse impacts tend to be compounded for women with their heavier work burdens and limited access to public information. An enabling business environment should ensure that the regulatory and legal frameworks do not discriminate against women, provide simple registration procedures and less red tape, and reduce transaction costs. Very importantly, women should be guaranteed equal access as men to secure property and land rights;
- Access to viable markets is critical; there should be specific measures to connect women in SMEs to global markets and to ensure that the growth of sustainable supply chains reaches down to benefit those at the lowest end in the informal economy.

#### Text Box 4.3

##### Support for women entrepreneurs

In the province of Hangzhou, People's Republic of China, at the start of the financial crisis, 75 per cent of women workers were employed by limited liability companies, private companies and foreign firms. They were mostly hired in manufacturing, wholesale and retail business, community services and other businesses. During the latter period of the crisis, the number of female workers declined in manufacturing enterprises while increasing in small businesses, including their own enterprises. This change in occupational patterns was attributed to the policy of the Chinese government which delivered a 4,000 billion yuan (about US\$586 billion) economic stimulus package to boost domestic demand. The government adopted preferential tax policies to stabilize the general job market and to assist disadvantaged women in finding jobs. It also improved small loan programmes and encouraged women to improve their entrepreneurial skills and set up their own businesses.

In Tianjin, the Tianjin Women's Business Incubator has helped some 10,000 women entrepreneurs in the People's Republic of China get back on their feet after losing their jobs. The initiative provides microfinance for the poor, rather than for large companies that are struggling to encourage them to start their own small businesses. Thanks to easy access to small business advice, many of these businesses have been successful even though most of these women had no previous experience running a business. Most women have been able to repay their loans to the organization.

Source: C. Luo: “Financial crisis hitting women workers hard”, in *China.org.cn* (Beijing), 26 Nov. 2009, [http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2009-11/26/content\\_18956967.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2009-11/26/content_18956967.htm) (accessed 7 Feb. 2011).

Wild Women Entrepreneurs: “Women entrepreneurs in China starting small businesses”, in *Wild Women Entrepreneurs*, 27 Jan. 2011, <http://www.wildwomenentrepreneurs.net/women-entrepreneurs-in-china-starting-small-businesses/> (accessed 7 Feb. 2011).

Rebalancing policies cannot ignore the agricultural sector, especially in view of factors such as the persistence of poverty in rural areas, the implications of climate change, the food crisis and, of course, the heavy dependence of women especially in the poorer Asian countries on agricultural livelihoods. Increasing diversification and agricultural productivity through technical progress and investment is crucial, but must take into account women's differential and inferior access to assets, information, skills and training as compared to men. For example, in land-scarce countries such as India, innovative approaches are needed (such as integrated programmes that support landless women's collective purchase of land and provide access to financial services and training in environmentally friendly farming practices), in addition to legislation to secure land rights for women (FAO, IFAD and ILO 2010, p. 112).

It is also important that agricultural extension services are tailored to meet the needs of small-scale farms and the women who work on these farms. Attention should also be given to non-farm activities in rural areas: SMEs, including cooperatives and other community-based organizations, can be an important source of rural employment and incomes. Entrepreneurship development targeting women in rural areas can help create the conditions for innovation, the uptake of new technologies, participation in expanding markets and opportunities for more and better jobs.

It is not enough to address only the demand side of the labour market. Gender-responsive measures aimed at enhancing the quality of Asia's human resources should be a central component of the rebalancing package. For those Asian countries which still have a ways to go to achieve MDG2, the emphasis should be on ensuring quality basic education for girls and boys alike and on reducing drop-out rates which tend to be higher for girls than boys. For most other countries, in particular middle income countries in Asia, the focus should be on skills development. A key challenge even before the crisis has been one of "low-skill, bad-job" together with "low-skill, low-tech" trap – they face skills mismatches (an inadequate supply of skills relative to the demands of firms), skills shortages (insufficient supply of the right skills) and skills gaps (an inadequate mix of skills) and certainly gender inequality with women having lower level of appropriate skills than men.

A quality labour force – with both women and men contributing to the fullest of their potentials – can foster a virtuous cycle of higher productivity, more and better jobs, income growth, innovation and development. Workers equipped with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to be competitive, dynamic and performance oriented would be able to effectively and efficiently adjust to shifting labour markets, changing technologies and new threats and opportunities in volatile global markets.

*Gender-responsive skills development* should seek to improve the quality of the workforce to meet the needs of today and build and sustain competencies for future development needs, giving attention to:

- Address gender norms that stream girls into "suitable" occupations and restrict their employability;
- Get women who have broken the "glass ceiling" and "glass walls" to act as mentors to girls and young women in the labour market;

- Improve the quality of education to benefit both girls and boys. In many Asian countries, the ratio of girls to boys has been getting closer to parity in terms of years of schooling and enrolment rates at all levels of education. But the quality of education is very much a concern; evidence is growing that the quality of education, as assessed by tests of cognitive skills, is significantly more important to economic growth than the quantity of education;
- Ensure that girls and women have equal opportunities as boys and men to vocational education and training and skills development that is connected to the world of work and the evolving reality of labour markets, enterprises and workplaces in different economic sectors (it is important to equip them for emerging “green jobs”);
- Ensure that women have access to lifelong learning, taking into account how their lifecycles differ from those of men (because of their reproductive functions women are much more likely than men to leave and re-enter the workforce several times over their life course);
- Facilitate the transition of young women and men from school to work, taking into account that young women (who are increasingly doing better in school than young men) face greater barriers entering the labour force;
- Institute systems for recognition and certification of formally or informally acquired skills and competencies. The “portability” of skills would make it easier for both male and female workers to move into new jobs; and
- Target particularly disadvantaged groups of women through specially designed skills training programmes, for example, through community-based and mobile training programmes to reach women in the informal economy.

### *Gender-responsive social protection*

Governments in the Asian region have been relatively quick to ensure that safety nets are included in the economic stimulus packages<sup>41</sup>. But these safety net measures have often been relatively limited and “have paid limited or no attention to gendered vulnerabilities” (Jones et.al. 2009, p. 197). A longer term social protection policy could aim to:

- *Establish universal social protection*<sup>42</sup>: A “social floor” would consist of a basic and modest set of social security guarantees to ensure that: (i) all residents have access to basic/essential health care benefits through pluralistic delivery mechanisms; (ii) all children enjoy income security at least at the poverty level through various family/child benefits aimed

<sup>41</sup> They include, for example, cash transfer programmes (such as in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand), expanding existing social security, pension, health insurance systems, housing support (such as low-income housing in the People’s Republic of China), subsidies for basic goods (rice for the poor in Indonesia), or expanding unemployment insurances schemes (in the People’s Republic of China and Viet Nam) (Hung 2009, p. 19).

<sup>42</sup> The core idea is that no one should live below a certain income level and everyone should be able to have access to at least basic social services in order to enhance decent work opportunities and inclusive development. The outcome document of the MDG Summit adopted by the General Assembly by consensus on 22 September 2010 endorsed the Social Protection Floor concept and states that “promoting universal access to social services and providing social protection floors can make an important contribution to consolidating and achieving further development gains”. See UN General Assembly: Resolution on “Keeping the promise: United to achieve the Millennium Development Goals” (A/RES/65/1). Available at: <http://www.un.org/en/mdg/summit2010/> (accessed 15 Mar. 2011).

to facilitate access to nutrition, education and care; (iii) the poor and unemployed of active age have access to some social assistance that avoids destitution; and (iv) all residents in old age or with disabilities enjoy income security at least at the poverty level through pensions for old age and disability. Such measures would not only boost economic and social security but would also encourage citizens to consume more and thereby boost domestic demand. For developed countries in advanced stages of demographic transition, it is especially important to give attention to social protection and measures to assist older women workers for productive ageing;

- *Extend social protection to the informal economy:* Measures such as by extending and adapting statutory social insurance, encouraging micro-insurance and area-based schemes, and promoting cost-effective tax-based social benefits (ILO 2002a) would be especially important for countries with large informal economies. The Unorganized Sector Workers Social Security Bill 2005 and the recent establishment of a National Social Security Fund for unorganized sector workers in India demonstrate that such measures are possible and crucial for the welfare of poor workers;
- *Address both economic and social vulnerability* through interventions that are not only “protective” (providing relief), “preventive” (averting deprivation) and “promotive” (enhancing incomes and capabilities) but also “transformative” (addressing concerns of social equity and exclusion): “Many of the difficulties involved in the provision of social protection for women relates to socio-cultural values that leave women in vulnerable positions. Clearly, social protection instruments designed for many categories of women must include a substantial ‘transformative’ element, in the sense that power relations between men and women become more balanced” (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004, p. 9). Text Box 4.4 provides an example of an asset transfer programme in Bangladesh that addresses economic and social empowerment for poor women.
- *Improve occupational safety and health (OSH).* Given the concentration of women workers in the informal economy and in agriculture, they face serious exposure to poor working environments, low safety and health standards and environmental hazards. The occupational safety and health risks would have increased in bad economic times, adding to the health problems and stresses informal women workers already face. Improving OSH will not only protect workers but also enhance productivity. The measures are not so much a matter of enforcing compliance with regulations as of providing workers with information and guidance on often simple and inexpensive measures to reduce risks.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> The ILO has developed and tested several modular training packages, such as the Participatory Action Training for Informal Sector Operators (PATRIS) and Improve Your Work Environment and Business (IWEB).

**Text Box 4.4**  
**The Chars Livelihood Programme:**  
**Addressing economic and social vulnerabilities of women**

The Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP) targets some 3.5 million people living in Northern Jamuna on riverine islands and bars commonly known as “chars”, they are some of the most food-insecure and poorest people in Bangladesh. Although the entire household benefits from the CLP, the named core beneficiary for the Asset Transfer Programme is almost always a woman. This strategy aims to increase and strengthen the position of women within the household, empowering them by enabling them to contribute more significantly to household income and decision making. Before CLP core beneficiaries receive their income generating asset they are formed into groups of approximately 22 beneficiaries, many of whom are illiterate and have received no formal education. Over 2,000 of these groups meet weekly. These spaces are not only used for administrative and educational purposes but also increase social capital and cohesion between women that may not usually meet in this way. By being part of such groups, these women are able to share their experience and knowledge, build networks of friendship and establish greater control and responsibility over aspects of their lives. CLP core beneficiaries are also taught a pre-established 56 week curriculum over an eighteen month period. Each structured session lasts one hour. Topics covered include:

- Health & the environment – involving personal hygiene, cleanliness of the house and homestead, drinking safe water, using sanitary latrines, child health and anti-natal care, family planning and healthcare for adolescents;
- Disaster preparedness – for flooding, drought and *monga* and river erosion. They also learn about the kinds of support, from each other, local government and NGOs, that are available during a disaster;
- Protection against social evils – including marriage registration, the legal age of marriage, polygamy, desertion, dowry and violence against women;
- Supportive capital – individual and institutional support which is available;
- Social capital & cohesion – highlighting and strengthening mutual trust and cooperation on an intra and inter-community level;
- Rights Awareness – the human and civil rights of char dwellers; and
- Loan Management – taught at the end of the CLP intervention cycle, this offers CLP core beneficiary graduates basic loan and financial management skills.

See: [http://www.clp-bangladesh.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=84&Itemid=81](http://www.clp-bangladesh.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=84&Itemid=81)  
(accessed 7 Feb. 2011).

*Targeted policies  
for particularly  
disadvantaged women  
workers*

Specific measures may be needed to redress the persistent effects of past or continuing discrimination or particular barriers and constraints that some groups of women workers have to contend with. The measures to empower women informal workers are described below. Women international migrant workers are another important and growing group that deserves targeted action because, as described above, they are especially vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and abuse in the different stages of the migration process. Another group for targeted action is domestic workers. The adoption of a comprehensive standard (an ILO Convention supplemented by a Recommendation, which will be discussed at the International Labour Conference in 2011) will be a milestone in the efforts to redress the discrimination in respect of employment and conditions of work and other human rights abuses to which domestic workers are particularly exposed.

*“Formalization”  
and decent work for  
informal workers*

A decent work approach to the informal economy would be to promote decent work along the entire continuum from the informal to formal ends:

- *Reducing decent work deficits in the informal economy* and providing a “level playing field” for informal workers and enterprises vis-a-vis those in the formal economy through:
  - Protection: legal recognition and protection of informal workers and enterprises including commercial rights for informal businesses, labour rights for informal wage workers, property rights for all informal workers, and social protection for all informal workers;
  - Promotion: to raise the productivity of informal enterprises and enhance employability of informal workers. Measures to support small producers and enhance entrepreneurship potentials of women are essential in this context;
  - Participation: participatory policy-making, rule setting and collective bargaining institutions and processes that include representatives of informal workers;
  - Special targeted measures: those who are especially disadvantaged or discriminated against, such as domestic workers, young jobseekers or migrant workers, may need special measures;
- *“Formalizing” informal enterprises and informal jobs.* A key issue is to ensure that formalization, whether of informal enterprises or informal jobs, is not just about regulation/registration but about conferring legally recognized rights and the benefits of operating formally or being employed formally by:
  - Creating incentives for informal enterprises to formalize, such as simplified registration procedures and progressive registration fees and legal recognition of property rights;
  - Creating incentives for socially responsible employment practices (such as encouragement of corporate social responsibility practices so that lead firms provide benefits covering workers along an entire supply chain); and
  - Regulating labour markets to extend the same basic worker benefits and rights to informal wage workers as to formal workers;
- *Expanding formal employment opportunities,* giving attention to both the quantity and quality of job creation and ensuring that both workers and enterprises have the capacity and flexibility to move up the continuum from the informal to formal economy. Gender equitable measures should promote employability of workers, importantly through ensuring that women have access to the skills, knowledge and competencies that enhance ability to secure and retain a job, progress at work and cope with change, secure another job if desired or need be, and enter more easily into the labour market at different periods of the life cycle.<sup>44</sup> Gender equitable measures should also support micro and small enterprises to enhance productivity and competitiveness, including through entrepreneurship and skills training for small producers, business support services, access to credit, technology and markets and support to move up global supply chains;<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, ILO Human Resources Development Recommendation 2004 (R195) and ILO Conclusions on Skills for Improved Productivity, Employment Growth and Development, International Labour Conference 2008.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, ILO Job Creation in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Recommendation 1998 (R189) and ILO Conclusions concerning the Promotion of Sustainable Enterprises, International Labour Conference 2007.

- *Enhancing the visibility, voice and validity of women and men in the informal economy.* Text Box 4.5 highlights WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing, global research-policy network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy) support to do so through:
  - Official visibility: Improving measurement and understanding of the needs, constraints and risks faced by the working poor, both women and men, in the informal economy; investing in sex-disaggregated, up-to-date statistics to inform policy decision making; documenting promising examples of policies and practices in support of informal workers;
  - Representative voice: supporting strong member-based organizations (MBOs) of informal economy workers and promoting the representation of such organizations in relevant policy-making, rule setting, and collective bargaining institutions and processes at all levels;
  - Legal and policy validity: promoting legal identity and rights of those in the informal economy as workers, entrepreneurs, asset holders and citizens of a country; giving legal recognition to MBOs of informal workers; and supporting inclusive reform processes for legal empowerment of informal workers.

#### **Text Box 4.5**

#### **The WIEGO Organization and Representation Programme**

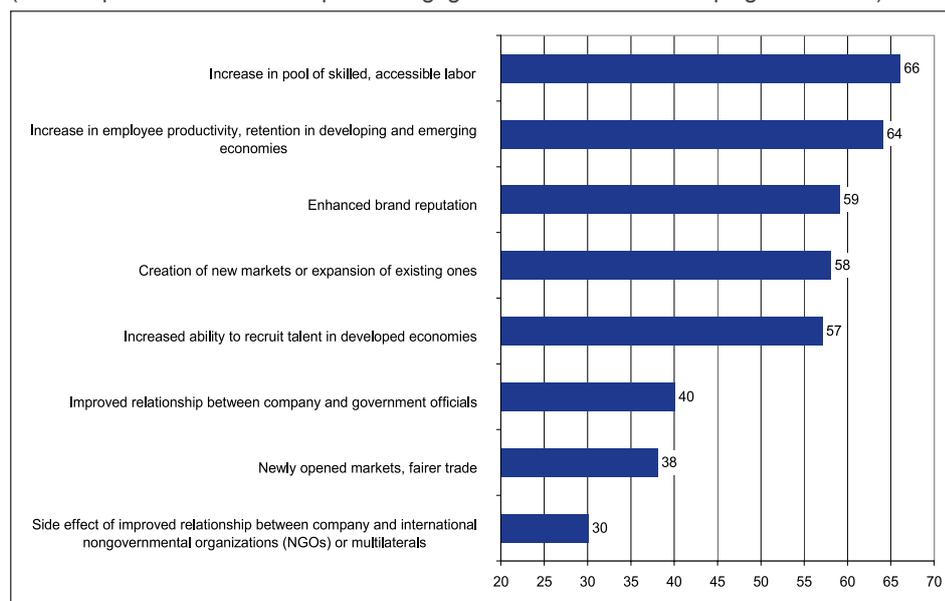
The poorest segments of the working class – those working in the informal economy and especially women – are the least able to make their voices heard by policy-makers, governments, employers, international agencies and others with the power to affect their lives. Informal workers need to organize to build confidence and power to take collective action, to gain recognition, and to represent themselves effectively. This is why the key objective of WIEGO's Organization and Representation Programme is to work together with organizations of informal workers to network, help build capacity and strengthen organization so that they increase their visibility, voice and power. The aim is to make a contribution to the development of:

- a critical mass of organized informal workers, with an increasing number of organizations of informal workers linked together and to the international trade union and cooperative movements;
- international networks of specific groups of informal workers, in addition to StreetNet and HomeNet, including waste collectors and domestic workers;
- a user-friendly data base of organizations of informal workers, including case studies, to be used by organizations of informal workers and by researchers studying different organizing strategies;
- an analysis of the types of policy and rule-setting institutions in which informal workers as a whole and specific groups of informal workers need representative voice; and case studies of how organizations of informal workers have gained representative voice in these institutions;
- a favourable legal framework appropriate for informal wage workers of various kinds and own account workers; and
- workers' education to a large and growing share of informal workers.

See: [http://wiego.org/program\\_areas/org\\_rep/index.php](http://wiego.org/program_areas/org_rep/index.php) (accessed 7 Feb. 2011).

**Figure 4.1. The benefits of hiring women**

(% of respondents whose companies engaged with women in developing economies)



Source: McKinsey Global Survey Results 2009, *Rethinking how companies address social issues*

[http://alumni.gsb.stanford.edu/women/pdf/mckinsey\\_global\\_survey\\_2009.pdf](http://alumni.gsb.stanford.edu/women/pdf/mckinsey_global_survey_2009.pdf) (accessed 7 Feb. 2011)

It is not just public policies for rebalancing that are critical. Especially as an important component of the rebalancing is the shift from the public to private sector, company policies will increasingly affect women's empowerment and gender equality in the labour market. There is increasing evidence that companies that hire and retain more women not only are doing the right thing but can also draw from a broader pool of talent in an era of talent shortages, and what's more, there is a correlation between high numbers of female senior executives and stronger financial performance.<sup>46</sup> Figure 4.1 makes a convincing business case for why companies should focus on women's empowerment and increase the hiring, retention, and promotion of female executives. Some of the main ways to do so include:

- Ensuring that the company's human resources policies are not inadvertently biased against women or part-time workers;
- Encouraging coaching, mentoring and networking for female employees;
- Ensuring that female employees receive the necessary training for higher positions and developing succession plans that include them;
- Establishing (and consistently monitoring at a senior level) targets for diversity, and
- Finding ways of creating a better work-life balance such as by offering flexible hours, maternity and child-care leaves, and coaching to ease the return to the workforce.

*Companies that rebalance towards gender equality will benefit*

<sup>46</sup> Various McKinsey reports make the business case. See, for example,

*A business case for women,*

<http://www.womenscolleges.org/files/pdfs/BusinessCaseforWomen.pdf> (accessed 7 Feb. 2011)

*Rethinking how companies address social issues,*

[http://alumni.gsb.stanford.edu/women/pdf/mckinsey\\_global\\_survey\\_2009.pdf](http://alumni.gsb.stanford.edu/women/pdf/mckinsey_global_survey_2009.pdf) (accessed 7 Feb. 2011)

## 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 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.

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# Appendix

## Defining informal sector and informal employment

The “informal sector”, according to the statistical definition adopted by the 15<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) in 1993, refers to employment and production that takes place in unincorporated small and/or unregistered enterprises. The broader concept of “informal employment” was defined ten years later by the 17<sup>th</sup> ICLS as all informal jobs, whether carried out in formal sector enterprises, informal sector enterprises or households - “employees are considered to have informal jobs if their employment relationship is, in law or in practice, not subject to labour legislation, income taxation, social protection or entitlement to certain employment benefits (advance notice of dismissal, severances of pay, paid annual or sick leave, etc.)”.

Informal employment comprises:

Persons employed in the informal sector including:

- Own-account (self-employed) workers in their own informal enterprises;
- Employers in informal enterprises;
- Employees of informal enterprises;
- Contributing family workers working in informal sector enterprises; and
- Members of informal producers’ cooperatives.

Persons in informal employment outside the formal sector, specifically:

- Employees in formal enterprises not covered by national labour legislation, social protection or entitlement to certain employment benefits such as paid annual or sick leave;
- Contributing family workers working in formal sector enterprises;
- Paid domestic workers not covered by national labour legislation, social protection or entitlement to certain employment benefits such as paid annual or sick leave; and
- Own-account workers engaged in the production of goods exclusively for own final use by their household (e.g. subsistence farming, do-it-yourself construction of own dwelling).

(For the full definition, see ILO 2003a).



## Women and labour markets in Asia

### Rebalancing for gender equality

The crisis response and recovery policies of Asian governments have been shaped by the lessons learned from the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s. An important lesson emerging from the recent crisis is that the policy goal should not be to return to a “normal” pre-crisis situation but to address fundamentals and not just short-term urgencies, and seize the opportunity to rebalance towards a new development trajectory that is job-rich, just, sustainable and inclusive. The main components of “rebalancing” have been identified as transition from public to private sector-led growth, domestic-led growth of consumption and investments in place of export-led growth, shifts to green jobs and green enterprises and deeper Asian regional integration. The theme of this report is that such rebalancing must, as a matter of both “smart economics” and social justice, also promote gender equality in the labour market. To be successful, rebalancing policies must mainstream gender equality considerations.

### About the International Labour Organization

The International Labour Organization (ILO) is the UN specialized agency dealing with work and workplace issues, and related rights and standards. Its overarching goal is to achieve decent work for all so everyone benefits from working conditions that offer freedom, equity, security and human dignity. In working towards this goal the ILO has four principal strategic objectives:

- To promote and realize standards, and fundamental principles and rights at work;
- To create greater opportunities for women and men to secure decent employment;
- To enhance the coverage and effectiveness of social protection for all;
- To strengthen the relationship between workers, employers and governments, and encourage social dialogue.

Founded in 1919, the ILO is the only surviving major creation of the Treaty of Versailles, which established the League of Nations. It became the first specialized agency of the United Nations in 1946.

### About the Asian Development Bank

ADB's vision is an Asia and Pacific region free of poverty. Its mission is to help its developing member countries reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of their people. Despite the region's many successes, it remains home to two-thirds of the world's poor: 1.8 billion people who live on less than \$2 a day, with 903 million struggling on less than \$1.25 a day. ADB is committed to reducing poverty through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration.

Based in Manila, ADB is owned by 67 members, including 48 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.

ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific  
United Nations Building, 11<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Rajdamnern Nok Avenue,  
Bangkok 10200, Thailand  
Tel.: +662 288 1234  
Fax: +662 288 3062  
Email: BANGKOK@ilo.org  
[www.ilo.org/asia](http://www.ilo.org/asia)

Asian Development Bank  
6 ADB Avenue, Mandaluyong City  
1550 Metro Manila, Philippines  
[www.adb.org](http://www.adb.org)



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ISBN: 978-92-2-124707-4