

IN BRIEF

# EVALUATION OF WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT THROUGH PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

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## Introduction and background

Women's economic empowerment is key to unlocking progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and would have a multiplier effect, not only towards achieving SDG 5 on gender equality but also SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth and SDG 10 on reduced inequality. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development states that sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth will not be achieved without realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Women's economic participation, decision-making and leadership – in the marketplace, workplace and community – are crucial to women's empowerment in Asia and the Pacific.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda recognizes that women's empowerment and leadership in the economy are vital for enhancing economic growth and productivity.<sup>2</sup> Both agendas encourage the private sector to contribute to advancing gender equality through support to women's full and productive employment and decent work, equal pay for work of equal value, and equal participation in entrepreneurship and innovation. However, gender norms have historically restricted women's economic opportunities by limiting their access to information, networks, jobs and assets.

### UN Women women's economic empowerment efforts in the Asia Pacific region<sup>3</sup> (2019–2021)

55  
projects

During 2019–2021, **16 UN Women offices** implemented approximately 55 projects in the Asia and the Pacific region focused on the broader Women's Economic Empowerment thematic area.

101M  
US\$ total budget

The **total committed budget** for these projects in the region was more than US\$101 million.

4  
regional projects

There were 4 regional projects (WeEmpowerAsia (WEA) and 3 migration-related projects) under the outcome area on Women's Economic Empowerment, which focused on **increasing women's participation and leadership in business and labour migration** programmes.

26%  
of the total budget

The Government of Australia/ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) was the **largest donor, covering 26 per cent of the total budget** for women's economic empowerment in the region. The European Union (EU) was the second largest donor, covering 9 per cent of the total budget, with the funds focused on a single regional project: WEA.

<sup>1</sup> ADB and UN Women. 2018. Gender Equality and the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific: Baseline and pathways for transformative change by 2030. Bangkok: UN Women. Available at <http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/10/apsdg>

<sup>2</sup> The Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development. United Nations 2015.

<sup>3</sup> UN Women offices in the Asia and the Pacific region include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, Fiji (Multi-Country Office which covers the Pacific region), India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Timor Leste and Viet Nam. Field presences are in Cambodia, Philippines, Thailand and Sri Lanka.

## Evaluation purpose and intended audience

The purpose of this independent evaluation was to inform UN Women's regional strategy for Women's Economic Empowerment work based on lessons learned from the WEA programme and facilitate an understanding of UN Women's portfolio in this thematic area, including how UN Women is defining and engaging with the private sector, achievements over the course of the Strategic Note period 2019–2021, opportunities and challenges, as well as gaps in programming and results. The primary intended users of the evaluation are ROAP, including the WEA team, field offices in which WEA is being implemented, UN Women field offices with women's economic empowerment initiatives, donors such as the EU, the Government of Australia/DFAT, stakeholders and implementing partners. Other users include UN Women Senior Management and programme staff at the headquarters, regional and country levels who are interested in or working on this thematic area. The evaluation may be useful for other actors, including private sector, partner governments, civil society, United Nations agencies, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), forums and platforms, national partners, as well as other donors.

The scope focused on ROAP functions, the regional WEA programme, and the Markets for Change programme implemented in Fiji given the high programmatic investments and opportunities for learning.

The geographical scope included Asia and the Pacific, with in-depth consultations in India and Fiji. To ensure a broader understanding of regional progress, country-level women's economic empowerment efforts that have been previously evaluated were also included. The scope also considered forward-looking perspectives on UN Women's engagement in the broader Women's Economic Empowerment thematic area.

## Methodology

The evaluation employed a non-experimental, theory-based approach, utilizing mixed methods to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, which were triangulated to maximize validity and reliability. A portfolio analysis of all women's economic empowerment efforts in the region was conducted, and a case study approach was the primary source of information for the assessment of contributions to outcomes in the selected areas. Contribution analysis was based on the theory of change reconstructed for this evaluation and captured through an evidence map. The analysis of 13 evaluations, which covered aspects related to UN Women regional efforts in this area, was also another key source of evidence. UN Women Independent Evaluation Service (IES) used NVivo qualitative data analysis software to analyse interview data.

## EVALUATION QUESTIONS



**RELEVANCE:** To what extent does UN Women's support to private sector engagement for women's economic empowerment align with global, regional and national priorities and speak to UN Women's value added within the women's economic empowerment space?



**COHERENCE:** To what extent is UN Women's regional- and country-level support to private sector engagement for women's economic empowerment internally coherent with the overall efforts of UN Women and the United Nations system in this area?



**EFFECTIVENESS:** How is UN Women advancing the women's economic empowerment agenda in the Asia and the Pacific providing innovative solutions and directly benefiting women's economic empowerment through the approach of private sector engagement?



**CONTRIBUTIONS TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY:** How did UN Women ensure regional and national ownership of private sector engagement for the women's economic empowerment agenda, and which areas of the WEA approach have the most potential for replication and scaling up?



**HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY:** How did UN Women identify and engage the most marginalized groups within the context of private sector engagement for women's economic empowerment? Are there any unintended results or contributions towards transformative change?



**ORGANIZATIONAL EFFICIENCY:** How well are UN Women's human and financial resources at regional level in Asia and the Pacific used to support efficient regional- and country-level women's economic empowerment efforts?

## Conclusions and recommendations

**CONCLUSION 1:** Women's economic empowerment is a high priority in the Asia and the Pacific region, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as a region that is vulnerable to climate-induced disasters, which has increased vulnerability and the burden of care, decreased women's participation in the formal economy and resulted in loss of income. Stakeholders look to UN Women for expertise and leadership to drive the agenda on women's economic empowerment with its coordination mandate and gender expertise. While the ROAP focus on the formal private sector is a critical and strategic priority within the region, the broader priorities for advancing women's economic empowerment across the region need to be better reflected in ROAP's regional strategy and programmes.

**CONCLUSION 2:** UN Women has mobilized private sector actors across the Asia and the Pacific region and furthered the implementation of women's economic empowerment measures at the workplace and in the marketplace. A holistic and integrated approach to women's economic empowerment, where efforts focus on policy and action by both the public and private sectors, the identification of synergies between the informal and formal sectors, and work with partners to influence transformation towards more gender equal societies, is where efforts by UN Women have proven to be most effective, with higher potential for scale up and sustainability.

**CONCLUSION 3:** UN Women in the Asia and the Pacific region is not consistently integrating an explicit approach to identification and engagement of marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities, in its women's economic empowerment efforts or how partners will be engaged to support social norms change to implement this approach. Embodying the principle of leave no one behind and developing tools to support implementation can produce ripple effects towards transformative change.

**CONCLUSION 4:** Investment in governance structures and staffing that support the functions envisioned for the Regional Office with respect to supporting field offices in key thematic areas could enhance efficiency.

### RECOMMENDATION 1

Recognizing the ongoing ROAP Strategic Note process, finalize the draft long-term regional women's economic empowerment strategy with a corresponding partnership and resource mobilization plan. The regional strategy should clearly articulate how UN Women will work with partners (particularly partners in the United Nations system) to advance women's economic empowerment. The strategy needs to reflect core UN Women values (leave no one behind) and define how informal and formal sector linkages will be supported, the roles and specific niche expertise in women's economic empowerment, and how interlinkages between thematic areas will be integrated.

### RECOMMENDATION 2

As part of the new regional women's economic empowerment strategy, codify UN Women programming models along the informal/formal private sector spectrum, emphasizing linkages between private sector engagement and policy change, establishing partnerships and facilitating exchange on available knowledge products and lessons learned to catalyse women's economic empowerment.

### RECOMMENDATION 3:

Develop an integrated approach to leaving no one behind by ensuring internal capacity to apply this lens in the programmatic cycle, engage partners that are led by or representative of marginalized groups and develop practical tools to support these efforts.

### RECOMMENDATION 4:

Invest core and other resources in building ROAP's technical capacity on Women's Economic Empowerment to fulfil its regional functions related to policy advisory, technical and capacity building support on country programming.

## OVERVIEW OF KEY DATA COLLECTED FOR THE EVALUATION

212

individuals consulted

185 females and  
27 males consulted

2

case studies

momentum building  
for private sector and  
women in marketplace  
(WEA and Markets for  
Change)

13

evaluations

reviewed in  
analysis of  
evaluations

55

projects

across Asia and the  
Pacific reviewed for  
the portfolio analysis

22

surveys

existing surveys  
reviewed