Program Evaluation of United Nations Women's Gender Equality Efforts in Asia
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The Authors & Foreword

The team is proud to present the **UN Women VNR Asia Report on Gender Equality**, which highlights the efforts of Voluntary National Review (VNR) 2022 Asia countries - Jordan, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, and United Arab Emirates - to address gender equality. This report was authored by an all-women group of five Master of Public Policy and Global Affairs candidates (MPPGA) at the University of British Columbia (UBC) who contributed their unique expertise and skills to ensure its success. With a diversity of positionalities and recognized outsider status, the team endeavored to provide a nuanced and inclusive analysis.

**With deepest thanks**, the team would like to extend appreciation to Dr. Grace Jaramillo of the School of Public Policy and Global Affairs at UBC and Ms. Florencia Tateossian of UN Women for their invaluable guidance throughout the development of this report. As an all women group, the team is honored and privileged to have had the opportunity to undertake this project aligned with the vision and mission of UN Women.

A United Nations entity, **UN Women** is a leading global organization committed to promoting gender equality and empowerment worldwide since their establishment in 2010. The organization works towards reducing gender inequality through policy advocacy, program implementation, and capacity-building while prioritizing human rights, social justice, and gender-responsive development.
The Authors & Foreword

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Xi Pu

Xi graduated from the University of Miami with a major in Economics and a minor in Public Relations. Her interest in policymaking stemmed from conducting research on food hunger programs and issues in the United States. She is passionate about contributing to the world’s sustainable development, with a particular focus on poverty alleviation, food insecurity, and education.
Executive Summary

Based on their respective Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) 2022, the following chapters highlight gender equality endeavors made by Jordan, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, and United Arab Emirates (UAE), specifically in efforts to increase women’s political participation, preventing and addressing violence against women, implementing evidence-based policy-making, promoting women’s economic empowerment, ensuring social inclusion, and improving women’s health.

The global landscape has been markedly impacted by a variety of events, including the Covid-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine. Amidst various challenges, these countries have made commendable progress towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5: Gender Equality, which refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men, and girls and boys.

Pakistan has taken action to increase women’s political participation, while also working towards protecting transgender rights. Sri Lanka acknowledges the importance of financial and political empowerment in promoting gender equality. Jordan has implemented measures to address violence against women and promote human capital development. The Philippines has made advances in reducing violence against women by establishing specialised services to promote gender equality and women empowerment. The UAE successfully drove legal reforms to narrow gender disparities, achieve gender balance in the public sector, and bring to fore needs of marginalised groups. These countries’ progress serves as a testament to their unwavering commitment to creating equitable and inclusive societies where women can participate fully and thrive.

The significance of these undertakings is amplified by the fact that they were made during a time of global crisis. Countries have had to navigate the Ukraine war, pandemic and their accompanying economic and social challenges while also managing country-specific incidents such as the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka. Despite these obstacles, each VNR (Asia) country has taken noteworthy strides towards achieving gender equality, with some exhibiting leadership in particular areas.

Gender equality is a journey that calls for persistent commitment. The progress made by VNR (Asia) countries is a testament to their determination to create more equitable and inclusive societies in which women can fully participate and prosper. As we continue to confront the challenges of the present, it is critical to acknowledge and support these efforts to attain SDG 5.
Asia's rich cultural diversity has seen some positive developments towards gender equality, such as the election of female presidents in Singapore and Bangladesh and the increasing visibility of women-led communities such as the Musuo in Tibet. International initiatives like the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals and the Beijing Platform for Action have played a significant role in promoting gender equality. That being said, traditional gender roles continue to pose significant barriers, seen in an estimated 100 million “missing” women across the region due to gender-discriminatory practices. Women also face limited access to education, employment, and financial resources. To confront these challenges, VNR countries have undertaken the following efforts to rewrite gender norms in the region.

**Pakistan**

Pakistan’s 2022 VNR emphasises progress in SDG implementation, including legislative changes to protect vulnerable populations. Pakistan launched its first Gender Policy Framework in March 2022, identifying gender participation in socioeconomic activities, empowerment of women, and achieving gender equality as key elements.

The government established coordination mechanisms and Monitoring & Evaluation institutions to overcome challenges in implementation. Aligning national development plans with SDGs and in the process involving all relevant stakeholders are key components of the country’s implementation plan.

**UAE**

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has high ambitions in achieving the 2030 Agenda for SDGs, as demonstrated by the establishment of a National Committee in 2017 to oversee SDG development and a Gender Balance Council to ensure gender-balance in policies. The UAE also has a centralised reporting and monitoring mechanism, SDG Adaa*. However, the VNR 2022 only focuses on Emiratis and fails to address the contributions and issues faced by immigrants and minority groups. While progress on SDG 5 is highlighted for Emirati women, women belonging to minority groups and immigrant populations are not mentioned. The UAE's efforts towards building a cohesive society are equitable and inclusive only to the extent of UAE citizens.

*Adaa means performance in Arabic
Jordan

Jordan has made substantive efforts to empower women and vulnerable groups through policies and strategies, such as the establishment of the National Social Protection Strategy and National Strategy for Women. These efforts demonstrate Jordan’s commitment towards ensuring gender inclusivity in social and economic development, particularly for vulnerable groups like refugees and people with disabilities. The report acknowledges the challenges faced by the country in the aftermath of the pandemic and geopolitical scenarios and emphasises the need for a multi-sectoral approach and partnerships with stakeholders for better gender equality.

Philippines

Philippines highlights significance of addressing gender inequality in sustainable development. Although some progress has been made in reducing gender-based violence, policies on gender equality lack evidence-based decision-making. Barriers to access in education and underrepresentation in the workforce persist as pressing issues for the country. The report emphasizes the inclusion of all gender perspectives in development policies and programs, allocating sufficient funding for gender-responsive initiatives, ensuring women and girls are actively involved in decision-making processes for sustainable development.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is committed to promoting gender equality and empowering women through economic empowerment. However, gender data gaps remain a major hurdle in policymaking. The country aims to address this by capturing gender-based data for more nuanced insights and evidence-based interventions. Sri Lanka’s roadmap for gender equality prioritises human capital development programs such as vocational training and upskilling, to overcome structural discrimination through knowledge building.
Key Themes & Main Findings

Women in Politics for Greater Gender-Balanced Policies

This finding underscores the importance of women’s voices to be heard in decision-making processes for more equitable and inclusive policies. Pakistan’s PASS Division, for example, has led to the implementation of gender equality policies, including the "one woman, one account" that brought rise to greater financial inclusion amongst women. The UAE has also achieved success through its legal reforms to promote gender equality, with the establishment of the Gender Balance Council, resulting in women occupying 50% of parliamentary seats, facilitating greater gender balance in the public sector.

Overcoming Structural Discrimination Through Economic Empowerment

All countries surveyed have implemented policies to promote women’s self-employment and/or economic empowerment. The Philippines introduced women entrepreneurship policies to propel self-employment amongst women and has also integrated gender and development into their public financial framework. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka’s approach involves upskilling women through vocational training to combat social stigmas and structural barriers. These policies are vital in achieving SDG 5 as they enable women to participate fully in economic activities and attain financial independence, allowing them to take on roles that have historically been inaccessible or restricted to them.
Key Themes & Main Findings

Sexual Violence Against Women Remains A Priority on the Policy Agenda

It is pertinent to prevent and resolve violence against women for a safe environment, within which women and girls can grow and thrive without fears of being thrown into physical harm’s way. All countries surveyed have made commendable progress in devising measures to address violence against women, including the enactment of new legislation, awareness-raising campaigns, and the extended provision of services to survivors. Sri Lanka acknowledges that one of the goals of Gender equality is to reduce sexual violence against women. Jordan, on the other hand partnered with Civil Society Organization, The National Team for Family Protection and Shama’s Network to expand Women and Girls Oasis centers as shelters of refuge in times of need.

Evidence-Based Policymaking

Evidence-based policymaking is necessary to achieve SDG 5 as it enables policies that are tailored to the specific needs of women and girls and based on accurate data. All countries recognize the importance of gender oriented data-collection. Sri Lanka sought cabinet approval for gender-based data collection. With exceptions of Sri Lanka and UAE, which are relatively smaller in population size, all other VNR countries have set up Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) for data collection, relationship-building, and policy monitoring.

No Mention of LGBTQ2+ in Most Countries Surveyed

Most VNR countries did not address LGBTQ2+, with Pakistan being the only country that mentioned the community in its report. Pakistan has made remarkable strides in raising awareness on transgender rights. Its Transgender Protection Act 2018 protects transgender individuals' rights to inheritance, education, employment, health, and political participation. The lack of attention to LGBTQ2+ issues in most countries is a reflection of persistent socio-cultural taboos surrounding gender identity, which policy can address, to achieve equitable and inclusive societies.
### Main Matrix Insights

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Violence against Women</th>
<th>Evidence-based Policy Making</th>
<th>VLRs</th>
<th>LGBTQ2+</th>
<th>Human Capital Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

✓ = Indication of policy orientation available either in aspirational or legally-binding forms
x = No mention/recognition of the issue in the country's Voluntary National Review 2022

### Key Definitions

**Violence Against Women**
- focuses on the country's policy approach and direction in addressing violence against women.

**Evidence-Based Policy Making**
- focuses on the country's approach to policymaking, monitoring, and evaluation through reliable data collection and analysis.

**Voluntary Local Reviews**
- focuses on the country's commitment to progress monitoring and relationship-building with stakeholders at local levels.

**LGBTQ2+**
- focuses on the country's recognition and inclusion of LGBTQ2+ community.

**Human Capital Development**
- focuses on the country's progress towards empowerment of women through education, social protection, and equal opportunities + representation in private & public sectors.
Case Study: Accelerating Gender Balance--UAE Advancing Women’s Leadership in the Private Sector

Goal: **30% increase in women representation** in senior management roles in private sector companies by 2025

In 2019, the UAE’s Private Sector Advisory Council on SDGs along with UAE’s Gender Balance Council and the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics conducted a focus group discussion with the country’s leading local and multinational private sector companies. The **main agenda of the discussion** was on advancing SDG 5: Gender Equality in the private sector. The discussion ended with a pledge of four key elements:

- Ensure **equal pay** and fair compensation practices;
- Promote gender-equitable **recruitment and promotion**;
- Reflect **ambitions through policies** and programs; and
- Be transparent with progress through **annual reporting** to the UAE Gender Balance Council.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Signatories (as of April 2022)</th>
<th>Signatories (as of Dec 2022)</th>
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**Conclusion**

Overall, response to the policy was **satisfactory**. **56 companies** have signed the pledge aiming for gender equality in senior management roles, of which **26 are private** and **30 are public companies** (5 local companies). The UAE is on track in its plans for gender responsive policies in both public and private sectors.
Facilitate a Measured and Steady Approach to Gender Policies for Sustainable and Lasting Impact

In some instances, short-term social changes from compliance-driven gender policies may undermine sustainable development by reinforcing traditional gender roles and increasing inequality. Changes in social sentiments requires sustained effort over time, and UN Women can play a critical role in moderating the pace and development of gender-responsive policies to ensure sustainability in the long run.

Catalyse the Use of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) as a Means of Building Trust Among Stakeholders, and to Scale Gender Policies

There is untapped opportunity in leveraging the potential of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) or other local-level working groups to scale up gender-responsive policies. These groups have demonstrated effectiveness in aiding the policymaking process through data collection and relationship-building, making them valuable middlemen for sustainable gender equality development. Additionally, promoting collaboration between different levels of governance through multi-level governance working groups can enhance the effectiveness of gender-responsive policies.

Provide Capacity-Building in Data Collection and Evidence-Based Policymaking

It is worth noting that many VNR countries have expressed a lack of technical competencies in collecting, analysing and utilizing gender-based data for policymaking purposes. Therefore, capacity-building in these areas can lead to more robust policymaking and benefit future program evaluation efforts to ensure that gender-focused policies are based on high-quality data and evidence, and that progress made towards gender equality and empowerment is sustainable.
Conclusion

**In summary**, UN Women's gender equality endeavours in Asia have made significant progress in advancing women's rights. Evaluation of the programs indicates that there has been policy breakthrough on several fronts — in widening women's access to education and healthcare, political participation, and economic empowerment. Moreover, UN Women's collaborative approach with various stakeholders, including governments, civil society organisations, and private sector partners, has led to fresh partnerships and synergy.

However, the evaluation also sheds light on challenges countries continue to face, such as the need to strengthen the sustainability of policy outcomes and to improve the collection and analyses of gender-disaggregated data. To ensure accountability and sustainability, UN Women could prioritise improving partnerships with key stakeholders and capacity-building across different levels of government.

Through the lens of the UN Women's Gender-responsive evaluation framework, EvalGender+, all VNR countries analysed have achieved gender-responsive policies and decision-making. This means that policies address the different needs of men and women, and focus on equitable distribution of benefits, resources, status, and rights yet are inadequate in tackling the root causes of inequalities. UN Women ought to maintain its commitment to the dynamic needs and circumstances of the region. This includes prioritizing gender-transformative policies that are targeted at underlying cultural, social, and political factors contributing to gender inequality. All in all, while the road to gender equality is a complex and ongoing journey, it is also an achievable and worthwhile good that merits our steadfast dedication and continued effort!
References

- VNR 2022, Jordan
- VNR 2022, Pakistan
- VNR 2022, Philippines
- VNR 2022, Sri Lanka
- VNR 2022, United Arab Emirates

Locke, S. (2022) “56 private-sector companies sign GBC SDG 5 pledge in 2022,” 18 December. Available at: Link