UN-Women Executive Board, First Regular Session 2023
Background Note: UN-Women's Operational Response at the Regional Level: Asia and Pacific

1. Context

Women and girls in Asia-Pacific have been disproportionately impacted by a number of complex crises in the region, including more frequent and intense climate related crisis. The socio-economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic continue to disrupt development gains. A recent study across seven countries in the region highlighted that 32 percent of women had left the labour market during the pandemic, compared to only nine percent of men, contributing to widening gender gaps in poverty.[1]

Economically, Asia-Pacific remained the fastest growing region in 2021, mainly due to high growth rates in China and India[2] and five of the Least Developed Countries in the region are scheduled to graduate to Middle Income Country status between 2023 and 2026[3]. At the same time, however, recovery trends in the region point to growing gaps in social and economic outcomes within and between countries[4]. In this context, women's economic opportunities appear to be shrinking, with women's already low labour force participation rates falling[5]. Women are disproportionately represented in the informal sector, where there are typically lower incomes and more limited labour and social protection for workers.

Discriminatory social norms contribute directly to limiting women's role in the paid economy, reflected in both occupational segregation and a disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work. Women in Asia-Pacific were found to spend more time on paid and unpaid **care work** than those in other regions, spending an average of 7.7 hours per day on care and domestic work, most of which is unpaid[6].

The representation of **women in leadership, politics and decision-making** is a critical concern. Globally, women hold 26.4 percent of seats in parliaments, among which the Asia Pacific region has some of the lowest rates of women's representation. In Asia women hold 21 percent of parliamentary seats and the rate in Pacific Island states is as low as 7.1 percent[7]. Women's representation remains similarly low in ministerial positions and as chairs of permanent committees particularly in areas such as finance and defence[8]. In other branches of government, this bleak picture remains unchanged. While women human rights defenders and civil society

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[1] UN-Women/ADB, Two Years On: The lingering gendered effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in Asia and Pacific, https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/stories/press-release/2022/06/the-covid-19-crisis-continues-to-exacerbate-gender-inequalities

[2] IMF Regional Economic Outlook, October 2021
[3] UN General Assembly, Report of the Secretary General, Implementation, effectiveness and added value of smooth transition measures and graduation support, August 2021, A/76/271. The countries expected to graduate are Bangladesh, Bhutan, Laos PDR, Nepal and Solomon Islands with consideration of five further countries deferred to 2024.
[4] UN ESCAP, UN-Women, The Long Road to Equality, 2020
[5] UN ESCAP, UN-Women, SDG 5 Profile, 2022
[6] UN ESCAP, UN-Women, the Long Road to Equality, 2020, Women in Asia Pacific spend 7.7 hours daily on care and domestic work, compared to 7.5 hours globally, among which only 3.1 hours are paid, while globally 3.3 hours were paid.
[7] International Parliamentary Union, monthly average data, November 2022, https://data.ipu.org/women-averages?month=11&year=2022&op=Show+averages&form_build_id=form-PuaAOjNblsVcuOby7k-9qmQmqiWRKdOpxFlGeHacmMI&form_id=ipu__women_averages_filter_form
[8] UN-Women, Snapshot of Women's Leadership in Asia and the Pacific, 2021, https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/in-focus/csw/snapshot-of-womens-leadership-in-asia-and-the-pacific

in the region are on the frontlines, advocating for social justice, women remain underrepresented in the justice sector, including in law enforcement, the legal profession and the judiciary.

The high prevalence of **violence against women and girls** remains a significant concern in the region. While globally approximately one woman in three has experienced sexual and/or physical violence from an intimate partner at some time in their lives, prevalence rates within the region range from 15% to 64%[9]. Nineteen countries in the region had a higher prevalence of intimate partner violence than the global average, including 12 out of 13 Pacific countries. The conditions triggered by the COVID pandemic, including escalating stress, mobility restrictions, loss of income and barriers to accessing support and services, intensified the risks of gender-based violence[10]. UN-Women-supported big data analysis reflected increased internet searches related to violence against women and girls during lockdowns in eight Asian countries[11]. Globally more than five women are killed by an intimate partner or family member every hour, with the largest number of such killings perpetrated in Asia-Pacific[12].

Asia-Pacific has been characterized as the most disaster-prone region in the world[13] while a review of progress on the Sustainable Development Goals notes that there has been a significant regression in terms of measures on **climate** action[14]. A study conducted by UN-Women highlights the profound gender-related implications of the climate crisis, including increased early and forced marriage, increased violence against women and girls, increased time burdens and reduced wellbeing[15]. Women often lack ownership of land and other productive assets, making coping with such challenges especially difficul, but at the same time, women play a significant role in both natural resource management and disaster response. Their situational knowledge is often disregarded and under-utilised in environmental policy and disaster risk reduction efforts and the lack of gender disaggregated data compounds the lack of visibility of women in this area. The regional consultations on the priority theme for the sixty-sixth Commission on the Status of Women in 2022 emphasised the urgency of mechanisms for women's inclusion in decision-making in adaptation and response frameworks on environmental degradation, climate change and disaster risk response as well as the need for more gender-disaggregated data to enable the design of responses and allocation of resources to meet the needs of women and girls.

Asia-Pacific also faces a number of **complex crisis contexts**, including situations of conflict and post-conflict, which disproportionately impact women and girls. The nature of conflict and its drivers have also shifted; the gender dimensions of non-traditional security risks, including climate change, cyber-security and violent extremism pose new challenges. Environmental degradation and climate change impacts are expected to exacerbate tensions and conflicts. The expansion of digital space during the Covid-19 pandemic increased security challenges related to cybersecurity, greatly intensifying the range and incidence of harms and crimes

[9] UNFPA (2020), Asia and the Pacific Regional Snapshot: Women who experience intimate partner violence, 2000 – 2020 https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/knowvawdata_regional_vaw_map_july_29_2020_final.pdf
[10] UN ESCAP/UN-Women SDG5 Profile 2022 https://www.unescap.org/kp/2022/sdg-5-gender-equality
[11] UN-Women, UNFPA, Quilt.AI, Covid-19 and Violence Against Women: The Evidence Behind the Talk, 2021 https://data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/documents/Publications/COVID-19%20and%20VAW_Insights%20from%20big%20data%20analysis_final.pdf
[12] UN-Women/UNODC Gender-related killings of women and girls, 2022 https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/11/gender-related-killings-of-women-and-girls-improving-data-to-improve-responses-to-femicide-feminicide
[13] UN ESCAP, Resilience in a Riskier World, Asia Pacific Disaster Report 2021, p.14
[14] UN ESCAP, Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2022, p.12
[15] UN-Women, The Impact of Climate Change on gender inequality outcomes: empirical evidence from South and South-East Asia, 2021

that affect women. UN-Women supported research has highlighted both the links between online extremism and expressions of misogyny[16] and the insidious range and impact of online violence against women[17].

2. UN-Women's Response: Key Priorities and Results, 2018 – 22

Governance and Leadership

A "whole-of-society" approach to governance and meaningful institutional reforms requires consistent state engagement with women and women leaders, women's organizations, civil society organizations, marginalized groups such as indigenous peoples, people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), and the private sector. The way in which national plans, policies and practices, legislation, institutions, infrastructure and budgets are being designed and developed reflect governments' commitment to gender equality. For instance, the 2030 Agenda promises to promote the rule of law and provide access to justice for all (target 16.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals), but justice systems deliver only for the few. Women have roughly the same number of unmet justice needs as men, but the nature of these needs reflect women's experience of disadvantage, exclusion, discrimination, and violence. Gender-specific barriers, such as biases in justice institutions and lack of gender-sensitive procedures prevent women from utilizing available pathways to seek justice and to realize their human rights.   The **Women's Access to Justice Programme**, implemented in partnership with the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) and OHCHR in Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines, the Pacific and Timor Leste, works with both the formal sector of the judiciary to strengthen CEDAW compliance in justice systems as well as with community mechanisms to strengthen the gender-responsiveness of community-based justice mechanisms and with women human rights defenders working on issues of women's access to justice. The programme has also focused on the intersectional dimensions of women's access to justice, for example focusing on access to justice for women with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities in the region[18] and with women in conflict with the law in the Philippines[19].

Women's Economic Empowerment

Given the importance of the private sector in Asia-Pacific, a key aspect of our work in economic empowerment has been engagement with the private sector through the **We Empower Asia Programme**. The programme has focused on engaging private sector entities in support of gender equality and women's empowerment including through the **Women's Empowerment Principles**, a set of commitments which now has over 2,000 signatories in Asia-Pacific. Companies have been encouraged to not only sign up to the principles but to identify and monitor concrete measures to improve their performance as businesses that support gender equality and women's empowerment across their businesses, markets and supply chains.

The Covid-19 pandemic has underlined the importance of the unequal burden of care as a constraint to women's engagement in paid work. UN-Women has engaged with entrepreneurs to explore the potential of care entrepreneurship as a way of providing care services at the same time as creating opportunities for women entrepreneurs and decent work opportunities for women care workers.   This has led to the development of the action research project on **Accelerating Care Entrepreneurship** which will take an ecosystem approach, working with investors, entrepreneurs and policy-makers to advance gender-inclusive care entrepreneurship.

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[16] UN-Women, 2020, Social Media Monitoring on Covid-19 and Misogyny in Asia and Pacific, https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEAsia/Docs/Publications/2020/10/ap-wps-BRIEF-COVID-19-AND-ONLINE-MISOGYNY-HATE-SPEECH_FINAL.pdf

[17] UN-Women, 2020, Online Violence Against Women: A Multi-Country Study, https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEAsia/Docs/Publications/2020/12/ap-ICT-VAWG-report-7Dec20.pdf

[18] https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/focus-areas/governance/womens-access-to-justice/disabilities

[19] https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/UNW_Pilot-Factsheet-Philippines.pdf

A continuing focus will be the engagement of women owned businesses, and particularly medium and small enterprises, in both public and private procurement supply chains through working with businesses, business associations and relevant regulatory bodies to ensure that procurement policies enable **gender-responsive procurement** and to equip women-owned business to engage in procurement processes in order to enhance their opportunities.

Ending Violence Against Women
Across Asia-Pacific, UN-Women has engaged with other UN agencies to implement comprehensive programming on violence against women under the EU-UN Spotlight initiative, including in Afghanistan, the Pacific, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Timor Leste and Vanuatu. The **Safe and Fair Programme** (part of the Spotlight initiative) works across Southeast Asia to ensure that migration is safe and fair for women migrant workers, a group at particular risk of violence and discrimination. The programme has supported an enabling environment for women migrant workers by bringing together stakeholders working on both labour rights and violence against women, resulting in the development of 48 laws, policies and strategies as well as establishing 10 referral mechanisms to help women migrant workers get the services they need. Engaging with member states and CSOs, the programme has directly provided information and services to over 220, 000 women and families and peer outreach to over 77,000 women migrant workers in the last 18 months alone[20]. Learning from the Safe and Fair programme will feed into the development of a **Prevention Framework of GBV and Harassment against women Migrant Workers in South and South-East Asia** which will provide guidance on strengthening prevention of violence against this group.

In addition to continuing to technically support member states to put in place National Action Plans on Violence Against Women and Girls and packages of essential services to respond to women and girls who experience violence through the adaptation of the global Essential Services Package to regional and national contexts, UN-Women is also focusing on the development of work to prevent violence against women including through promoting social norm change. This work is based on the regional **Violence Against Women and Girls Prevention Strategy**, which includes strategies to engage men and boys and to engage youth and technology as part of social norm change efforts.

Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action

There has been notable progress on **women, peace and security** in the Asia and the Pacific region as reported in a 2020 study released by UN-Women, acknowledging that **14 countries have developed national action plans on women, peace and security**; 59 per cent of peace agreements in the region included substantive gender provisions; 10 per cent of the police force in the region are women (compared to the global average of 9 per cent); and that there are 723 women peacekeepers from 12 countries deployed. Considerable challenges remain – with a need for more influential women, peace and security champions; more women's participation in peace talks and peacebuilding. However, there has been increasing momentum to advance the women, peace and security agenda in the region in recent years. For instance, the ASEAN-owned regional study[21] on women, peace and security demonstrates commitment to better understand these issues in the context of South-East Asia and with UN-Women support ASEAN recently launched a **Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security[22].**

In relation to disaster **risk reduction**, the adoption of Asia-Pacific Action Plan 2021-2024 for implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 is a strategic entry-point to advance gender-mainstreaming in regional and national policy frameworks. Disaster risk is becoming increasingly complex,

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[20] Programme data from all countries for the period January 2021 – June 2022, as reported at the 2022 Regional Programme Advisory Committee of Safe and Fair
[21] https://asean.org/book/asean-regional-study-on-women-peace-and-security/
[22] https://asean.org/asean-regional-plan-of-action-on-women-peace-and-security/

with risk drivers and consequences multiplying and colliding in unprecedented ways. The Sendai Framework underscores the importance of women's participation and leadership in reducing disaster risk and designing, resourcing, and implementing gender-sensitive policies, plans, and programmes towards building resilience. According to the **Women's Resilience to Disasters Policy Tracker**, there are currently more than 32 national and regional gender-inclusive legal and policy frameworks in place in countries in Asia and the Pacific, although implementation has been limited. Despite this progress, only a fraction of Asian and Pacific countries have been collecting and using sex, age, and disability disaggregated data to monitor the implementation of the Sendai Framework, and even fewer countries have been able to mainstream gender and social inclusion in Target E – National and local strategies for DRR. As a result, targeted assistance and programming, as well as meaningful participation of marginalized groups, continue to be limited. With UN-Women support, the **ASEAN Agreement on Disasters Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) Work Programme 2021-2025** reflects the unique needs and key roles of those most affected by disasters, including women, children, youth, the elderly, and people with disabilities, legally binding for ASEAN member states. In the Pacific, the **Women's Resilience to Disasters Programme** advances the resilience of lives and livelihoods of women and girls to disasters and threats and support local women leaders in climate and disaster resilience to participate and advocate in global and regional normative processes.

UN-Women in Asia-Pacific has demonstrated its capacity to support our partners and offices to pivot our work to **humanitarian/crisis contexts** including climate-induced disasters and conflict situations, as well as throughout the Covid pandemic period. Strategies have included supporting the collection and sharing of gender data to guide crisis responses that better meet the needs of women and girls as well as providing guidance and training to partners to adapt service provision to pivot to a humanitarian context, including through promoting cross-learning and deployment between UN-Women presences in different countries. Complex crisis contexts, such as Afghanistan and Myanmar, illustrate how a humanitarian situation rapidly becomes a "gender emergency" where the role of women's groups and robust gender analysis is crucial for humanitarian response to ensure that those most disproportionately impacted, women, girls and marginalized groups, receive the support and recovery needed. The region has faced profound climate-induced disasters, such as in Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Pacific islands, which increase the urgency of gender-responsive action in preparedness and recovery.

Cross-cutting Priorities

UN Coordination
UN-Women Asia-Pacific continues to strengthen coordination and collaboration in support of gender equality and women's empowerment in the context of UN reform both through working closely with Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams at country level as with the Regional Collaboration Platform at regional level. Regional Office supports the conduct of the UNCT Gender SWAP Scorecard as a key tool for UN system accountability on gender equality and women's empowerment and provides training and advice to UNCTs in support of the integration of gender in the UNSDCF process. Together with UNOHCHR and UNFPA, UN-Women co-chairs the regional Issue-Based Coalition on Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment and Human Rights, a regional mechanism to support Resident Coordinators. The Regional Office's commitment to Joint Programing is demonstrated by the fact that the majority of non-core-funded multi-country programmes in the Regional Office portfolio are implemented as Joint Programmes with UN sister agencies. The Regional Office also plays a leading role in coordination mechanisms in the humanitarian space as co-chair of the Asia-Pacific Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group, one of the longest-running Gender in Humanitarian action working groups globally, which has enabled establishment of country level Gender in Humanitarian Action working groups in countries facing crisis, including Afghanistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, (Cox's Bazaar) and Nepal.

Intergovernmental Support
UN-Women works with member states and civil society in order to maximise the impact of intergovernmental processes at regional level. Regional Office partners with UN ESCAP to co-host regional convenings to prepare for the CSW on an annual basis and co-organizes expert group meetings as well as formal preparatory

processes as part of the Beijing Platform of Action review process. The Regional Office also supports Country Offices in support of national CEDAW processes and other interactions with human right mechanisms as relevant.

Gender Statistics

The lack of gender disaggregated data renders women and girls invisible and limits the evidence base to design, resource and monitor policies and programmes to meet their needs. Even the capacity to monitor progress against the Sustainable Development Goals at national and regional level is limited by the lack of relevant data. Disaggreggated data including by sex, age and disability (SADD) is key to understanding how gender intersects with other inequalities. As part of the global **Women Count** programme, UN-Women Asia-Pacific has focused on supporting national statistical offices to ensure that their national statistical strategies are gender-responsive and in addressing capacity and resource constraints. Technical assistance to member states around gender data has included a focus on areas where data is particularly lacking such as on the gender-climate change-disaster risk reduction nexus as well as on care use. UN- Women has also partnered with the regional commission, UN ESCAP, with regional bodies such as ASEAN and with the Asian Development Bank to support regional level meta-analyses of gender data, including in relation to the impacts of COVID-19 and progress against SDGs. UN-Women continues to work with the UN Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific to design and implement gender statistics training.

Climate Change

UN-Women has partnered with the UN Environment Programme in efforts to promote women's leadership in climate adaptation and mitigation and DRR efforts under the **EmPower** programme, achieving advancements in influencing national and regional normative processes and actions on integrating gender equality in climate change, renewable energy, and disaster risk reduction. The programme has supported three member states, Bangladesh, Cambodia and Viet Nam, to create an enabling environment for gender mainstreaming through the preparation of gender inclusive **Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and Climate Change Gender Action Plans (CCGAPs)** as well as promoting the production and use of gender statistics and creating opportunities for women's visibility and leadership, inclusive of both women from the public sector and from CSOs and communities. The programme contributed to uptake of renewable energy technology, through facilitating women's access, capacities and skills to enable them to run renewable energy enterprises. The solar PV and solar thermal systems installed under the programme are expected to reduce 15,000 tonnes of CO_2 emissions throughout their life cycle. The programme has also demonstrated women's leadership in renewable energy entrepreneurship. A total **of 473 women have established or improved livelihood activities** and over 1,689 women receiving indirect economic benefits such as improved standard of living due to access to basic services including water, reduced health and protection risks due to accessible and cleaner energy sources, and time saved due to availability of products and services in their communities. The change assessment conducted demonstrated key gains in terms of agency, economic opportunities, and resilience. A total of **39 renewable energy-based climate resilient interventions** were installed enabling women to expand and improve quality of production and generate increased income and savings.

3. Priorities for 2023 – 25

The UN-Women Asia Pacific Regional Office Strategic Note for 2023 – 25(SN), which was approved in late 2022, represents the regional-level iteration of UN-Women's global Strategic Plan. Building on lessons learned from our previous regional Strategic Note, programme evaluations and consultations with Country Offices and diverse partners, the Strategic Note sets out key priorities for the next three years.

In line with the global Strategic Note, there will be a focus on changing the harmful social norms that create environments where women's economic and leadership opportunities are limited, where women bear the burden of care work and where violence against women and girls is normalized. Actions will include working with a network of young influencers and leaders from across the region, co-creating a prevention hub to advance evidence-based work on social norm change to prevent gender-based violence, and a focus on innovative solutions to address the care burden.

In relation to Women, Peace and Security, UN-Women's work in Asia-Pacific will address emerging issues in relation to new security threats such as cyber-security and climate security, at the same time as continuing to support member states to develop and implement National Action Plans and supporting the engagement of women in peace talks and peacebuilding. Women's access to justice will continue to be a priority, as part of a comprehensive regional framework to promote inclusive and gender-responsive governance.

In our intergovernmental work, UN-Women Asia-Pacific will continue to work closely with the Regional Commission and member states to reinforce and support key global processes from regional and national level, including the annual Commission on the Status of Women and the upcoming periodic review of progress against the Beijing Platform for Action[23]. Creating space for the engagement of civil society and engaging with civil society movements and networks will continue to be a priority, particularly given issues of shrinking civic space and backlash on women's rights in some contexts. At sub-regional level, building on the lessons learned from UN-Women's engagement with the Association of South East-Asian Nations (ASEAN), UN-Women will continue to engage with ASEAN in relation to statistical work, ending violence against women, Women Peace and Security and DRR, and is exploring opportunities to engage on climate issues. UN-Women will also explore opportunities to apply approaches that have been successful in work with ASEAN to sub-regional bodies in other parts of the region. UN-Women Asia-Pacific will also continue to demonstrate our commitment to support the whole UN system to better address gender equality and women's empowerment through our leadership of regional coordination mechanisms, through support to Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams and through a strong commitment to Joint Programming.

In terms of how we deliver results, UN-Women Regional Office will increasingly organize our human and financial resources to ensure that our technical expertise is deployable from regional level to country offices as well as networked between offices. This approach builds on lessons learned from crisis responses, leverages the expertise in remote work that has been developed during the pandemic and is in line with the UN-Women corporate focus on pivoting to the field.

In line with the increasing frequency and complexity of crises in Asia and Pacific, including those due to the increasing impact of climate change, and with UN-Women's recent membership of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)[24], building our readiness for crisis response and humanitarian settings will be a key priority during this period. A recent evaluation of UN-Women Crisis response in Asia and Pacific[25] concluded that there had been significant progress in crisis response and that UN-Women's work is relevant to the priorities and needs of women and girls in crisis setting. Membership of the IASC provides an important opportunity to leverage UN-Women's coordination mandate, with a remit of assisting the humanitarian system to hold itself accountable to gender commitments and standards. There will be a focus on ensuring country presences are oriented on preparedness and response actions[26], to be able to respond to localized and national humanitarian crisis contexts, as part of coordinated UN approached through UN Country Team/Humanitarian Country Team. UN-Women will harness its triple mandate to support gender in in the humanitarian space through the humanitarian architecture and interlinked response/recovery/development-focused operational programming, This entails leveraging engagement in

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[23] The 30-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action will take place in 2024 - 25
[24] UN-Women joined the IASC in October 2022
[25] https://gate.unwomen.org/EvaluationDocument/SummaryDocIndex?evaluationDocumentID=9815
[26] Building the UN-Women Humanitarian Strategy as well as recommendations from the Evaluation of UN-Women Crisis Response in Asia and Pacific

Gender in Humanitarian Action working groups and developing rapid gender analysis and strategic guidance to humanitarian response plans. UN-Women country presences will be capacitated to provide strategic input to system-wide humanitarian and crisis response plans and to advance humanitarian response, building on existing work on women's multi-purpose centers, engagement with women's groups, livelihood promotion and referrals to existing GBV services.