

Bridging the Gender Gap

Work, Wealth, Welfare and Well-being for Women



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Bridging the Gender Gap: Work, Wealth, Welfare and Well-being for Women is jointly published by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's (KAS) Regional Economic Programme Asia (KAS SOPAS) and TalentNomics India.

Research Team: Thought Arbitrage Consulting (www.tari.co.in)

Ms. Kshama V. Kaushik

Ms. Rosanna M. Vetticad

Ms. Bhawna Bhushan

Mr. Kushagra Sharma

Ms. Akshata Gupta

Research Coordination: Ms. Cristita Marie Perez (KAS SOPAS) and Ms. Disha Tripathy (TalentNomics India)

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Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Japan Office/Regional Economic Programme Asia (KAS SOPAS)

Sanno Park Tower 25F, 2-11-1 Nagatacho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, 100-6125



+81-3-6426-5041



KAS-Tokyo@kas.de



www.kas.de/japan

TalentNomics India

M-113, 2nd Floor, Saket, New Delhi - 110017



+91 95600-35807



talentnomicsindia@gmail.com



www.india.talentnomics.org/

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About Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Regional Economic Programme Asia (KAS SOPAS)

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is a German political foundation that holds freedom, justice, and solidarity as the basic principles underlying their work. KAS Regional Economic Programme Asia (SOPAS) is a regional forum that contributes to the debate and reform of economic and governance models in Asia. SOPAS focuses on the following three strategic areas: (1) advancing women in leadership; (2) free trade and multilateralism; and (3) the future of work. Furthermore, it brings together a network of policymakers, economists, political analysts, and thought leaders across Asia to discuss emerging issues, propose policy alternatives and share best practices. These discussions in Asia are also brought to the fore in Europe through expert conferences, seminars, and workshops. Publications on these key topics are regularly released to provide insights and recommendations to national and regional policymakers.

About TalentNomics India (TNI)

TalentNomics India is a non-profit organisation working towards building a more sustainable world by creating a gender-equal universe - an Equiverse. We envision Impactful and Influential Women in Leadership Roles, who have Equal representation as well as Equal Voice, across sectors in Asia.

We are dedicated to taking actions that will help grow the pool of women leaders and have adopted a holistic and integrated approach for creating an ecosystem that promotes and supports women to succeed and lead organizations across all sectors of the economy.

We see ourselves as influential change agents to support and guide women on their professional journey. We also conduct original research as well as provide a platform to show-case innovative approaches, share and learn from best practices as well as facilitate thought-provoking discussions to influence and lead the journey towards gender parity at leadership levels.

About Thought Arbitrage Consulting (TAC)

Thought Arbitrage Consulting (TAC) is a multi-disciplinary independent research think tank and consulting organisation based in India with more than a decade of experience in defining public policies and their implementation, in the areas of Economics, Gender and Diversity, Public Policy, Corporate Governance and Sustainability.

TAC works with the Government of India and State Governments, regulators and standard setting bodies, industry chambers, academic institutions, corporates and other stakeholders across the spectrum and across regions (in India and globally) to find delimitative answers using quantitative

and qualitative techniques through a mix of primary and secondary research. The fundamental objective of our research is to be an intellectual link between business and society so that: 1) business can be more responsive to the needs of society and can add greater value; 2) society can create an environment in which business can thrive; 3) business and society can transcend their pre-dispositions/concerns and come together to address critical human issues.

The organisation is propelled by the belief that arbitrage today has less to do with labour, cost and capital and more to do with knowledge, ideas and thought. Countries that are ahead in these areas tend to control the course of global economic pathways to improve the lives of citizens.

| Foreword by KAS SOPAS

Women's economic empowerment is a keystone in achieving gender equality. Women should be able to equally participate in and benefit from the economy, engage in decent work, and have autonomy over their lives and bodies. Women should also equally participate in decision-making at all levels, both in the private and public spheres.

The research publication ***"Bridging the Gender Gap: Work, Wealth, Welfare and Well-being for Women"*** jointly undertaken by the **Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Regional Economic Programme Asia (KAS SOPAS)** and **TalentNomics India**, through **Thought Arbitrage Consulting (TAC)** looks at four dimensions of economic empowerment (i.e., work, wealth, welfare and well-being) of women in the formal sector (as employees and as business owners and entrepreneurs) in Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Building on the existing literature, the research contributes new data gathered from a survey of over 1,000 participants, focused group discussions (FGDs), roundtables and key expert interviews conducted in the target countries. It critically looks at gender gaps in the workplace, assesses financial well-being as a domain of economic equality, women's physical, mental, and emotional health, and analyses government and other policies that promote women's economic empowerment.

Although the four countries included in the study have different political and economic contexts, key themes emerged. **First**, while substantial gains in education have been accrued, significant issues remain. Specifically, increased enrolment rates do not automatically translate to increased labor participation rates. **Second**, women often face intrusive questions about their marital status in job interviews and must contend with male-centric job descriptions during the recruitment process. **Third**, large proportions of women in the formal sector are mostly in low-skill, low-paying jobs. Finding time and opportunities to upskill and/or re-skill is difficult due to sizable responsibilities in doing and managing both household and care work. This limited ability to pursue training, among others, contributes to maintaining the gender pay gap and restricting women to qualify for and occupy higher positions in the workplace. **Fourth**, financial literacy levels and sources of financial education vary across countries. However, women continue to lag in financial management and wealth building. In addition, difficulties remain in accessing capital and other funding options. The low utilization of government initiatives encouraging entrepreneurship suggest that barriers, such as inadequate awareness and outreach, persist. **Fifth**, women continue to be under-represented in managerial and leadership roles both in the corporate and political spheres. **Lastly**, the disproportionately large amount of time spent on unpaid household and care work, internalized guilt, lack of family support, and unsupportive work environments contribute to issues in well-being.

Policy making plays a key role in developing institutions that foster equitable societies. ***"Bridging the Gender Gap: Work, Wealth, Welfare and Well-being for Women"*** offers recommendations that governments and the corporate sector can take up to realize this vision. This publication can be read as a consolidated report providing cross-country findings and insights. Chapters containing country case studies can be perused as stand-alone reports giving more detailed and context-specific information. It is our hope that this publication will be used as a resource for policy making and in aid of legislation in government circles, as a valuable source of data for the research and academic communities, and as reference for informed public opinion and discourse.

Paul LINNARZ
Director, Regional Economic Programme Asia (SOPAS)
Country Representative, Japan
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

Foreword by TalentNomics India

TalentNomics India's objective is to foster a gender equitable universe-an Equiverse. This study is our effort towards understanding the barriers women face in accessing equal opportunities under the 4Ws, viz. Work, Wealth, Welfare and Well-being across select countries in South Asia: Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka. Through review of secondary data, collection of primary data from women in business and women in employment, followed by interviews and focussed group discussions, the report outlines several policy recommendations toward bridging the gender gap in each of these countries. The study uses Thailand in South East Asia as an anchor country to understand the relatively better position Thailand enjoys in various gender-related indicators compared to these South Asian countries.

This is in line with the Indian government's recent announcement to increase female labour force participation through various initiatives. While all three countries have taken many steps towards creating gender parity in all areas, much work is still needed to give women the same opportunities to work, earn and live a fulfilling life. We hope this report will provide a framework for discussion among all stakeholders in these countries and an impetus to act on the recommendations, to systematically address existing barriers and reduce the gender gap in accessing the 4Ws.

We thank our research partner Thought Arbitrage Consulting (TAC) for their thorough research and deep analysis. I sincerely thank the research team lead by Ms. Kshama V Kaushik and ably supported by Ms. Rosanna M. Vetticad, Ms. Bhawna Bhushan, Mr. Kushagra Sharma and Ms. Akshata Gupta. I also thank Ms. Disha Tripathy from the TalentNomics India team who has helped manage the project smoothly in coordination with Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS SOPAS) and TAC, and Ms. Ina Wadhwa for supporting this project.

This study is a very valuable contribution to the existing body of literature on understanding gender gaps in the formal workforce with actionable insights. It would not have been possible without support from KAS. Their partnership and guidance have helped us to complete this study within the agreed time frame. My sincere gratitude goes to Ms. Rabea Brauer, who initiated the study and Mr. Paul Linnarz and Ms. Cristita Perez who guided the work with their valuable comments and insights.

Ipsita Kathuria
Founder and CEO
TalentNomics India

Authors Preface by TAC

The inclusion of women in the labour force has a profound multiplier effect on economies and can significantly boost a country's GDP. Women bring diverse perspectives, innovative solutions and creative approaches that are essential in today's rapidly evolving global economy. The pursuit of gender equality is not just a moral imperative, it is the very foundation of sustainable development and in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), specifically SDG 5.

This study, ***Bridging the Gender Gap: Work, Wealth, Welfare and Well-being for Women***, commissioned by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Regional Economic Programme Asia (KAS SOPAS) and undertaken by Thought Arbitrage Consulting (TAC) in collaboration with TalentNomics India, is guided by the hypothesis that gender equality is a powerful tool for driving economic growth and social progress. It studies challenges and barriers that women face in three countries, namely, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka juxtaposed with Thailand as the anchor country.

We found that while each country has its unique political and economic ecosystem, the obstacles women encounter in the formal sector in each of these countries remain interestingly consistent. Some of these include legal and social barriers to joining the workforce, the disproportionate burden of unpaid labour and care borne by women, mobility hurdles and limited access to finance.

Our approach to this research was meticulous, blending rigorous analysis of secondary data with insights from primary sources. We drew from globally recognised indicators, such as those from the World Bank, its Women, Business and the Law reports and the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (amongst other sources). To triangulate this data and deepen our understanding of the realities in each country, we conducted surveys (with more than 1,100 respondents), one-on-one interviews, as well as focussed group discussions and roundtables. These conversations informed our findings and revealed the cultural norms and policies that either accelerate or hinder women's career growth.

Our anchor country, Thailand, stands out as a success story in empowering women. Its progressive Gender Equality Laws, combined with a focus on gender sensitisation at an early age, equip women with the tools, rights and the authority they need to succeed in the formal economy. Thailand's approach demonstrates how legal frameworks, when paired with societal awareness, can transform gender equality from a distant goal into a tangible reality. The contrast between Thailand and the other countries highlights the critical role that systemic reforms and cultural shifts play in enabling women to thrive professionally. Despite these distinguishing characteristics, however, challenges persist in Thailand as well, which are discussed in our study.

This report is not just an analysis—it is a call to action, a meaningful contribution to the ongoing public discourse worldwide, and a roadmap for creating a more equitable, inclusive and prosperous future for all. Our report offers concrete, actionable solutions aimed at fostering real change. We provide a comprehensive set of tailored recommendations for policymakers as well as the formal sector, outlining clear and practical steps that can advance gender equity.

The journey to gender equality is long. Each stride in that journey lays the groundwork for future generations, giving them the tools and skills to reshape society and the workforce, ensuring that more women not only enter the workforce but are able to remain, advance, and thrive within it. ***Every small victory brings us closer to a world where gender equality is not just an aspiration but a reality.***

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the team that brought this project to life. Their unwavering dedication, insightful contributions and tireless efforts have been the driving force behind this research.

I also offer my heartfelt thanks to the KAS SOPAS for their support and valuable feedback through the course of the research, and to TalentNomics India for their invaluable insights and for helping us with seamless communication. This report stands as a testament to our shared commitment to advancing gender equality in the workplace and I am confident that our collective efforts will contribute to meaningful change.

Kshama V Kaushik

Partner

kshama.kaushik@tari.co.in

Thought Arbitrage Consulting

New Delhi

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Praneetha, Telecom Engineer, Sri Lanka

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Participants at the Sri Lanka FGD at Granbelle Hotel on May 31, 2024

Dilani Samanthika (via Zoom), Chief Executive Officer and Founder, Cloud Content Marketing Private Limited

Kumudini Chandrasekara, Deputy Director, Ministry of Finance, Government of Sri Lanka

Masheshika Kumari, Assistant Director, Ministry of Finance, Government of Sri Lanka

Sachini Hulugalle, Attorney-at-Law and Notary Public, Company Secretary and Commissioner for Oaths

Sashimi Withna, Assistant Director, Ministry of Finance, Government of Sri Lanka
Sriyani Hulugalle, Former Senior Economist, World Bank

Participants at the Sri Lanka FGD at Good Market on June 1, 2024

Achinthya Nelizama, Founder, Wellness cultz
Gayendri, Founder, Gaya by Gayendri
Hasanga Perera, Founder, Clay Tale
Priyanga Manohari Ratnayaka, Founder, Ceylon Spice Hub
Rupika Perera, Founder, Ru Designer
Shashini Dulangi Midigaspaga, Founder, Saduni Batik
Sheran Fernando, Founder, Rusteals
Terani Kaushalye, Founder, Miss Nutri

Participants at the Thailand Roundtable at Grande Centre Point Ploenchit on June 6, 2024

Alka Gupta, Agath Healthcare
Chuan Thakur, Indian Association of Thailand
Karine Lohitnavy-Frick, Master Connector, Midas PR
Khemphawika Sriraksa, HRM, MSSL Thailand
Laxmi Sachdev, Director, Laxmi Sachdev Associates, Thailand
Milan Mishra, Assistant General Manager, Motherson Wiring Harness
Patcharee Thongrit, Director, Sabaijai Trading LLP and Pattthai Intergroup Co. Ltd
Sanjeev Sood, Group Country Head and Board Director, Aditya Birla Group, Thailand
Shabnam Mehta, Senior Vice President, Aditya Birla Group, Thailand
Sirikorn Panumat, Lumen, Thailand
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Participants at the Bangladesh FGD held via Zoom on June 24, 2024

Barrister Jaharat Adib Chowdhury, Chief Legal Officer, Banglalink
Chetona Adhikari, Treasury, Green Delta
Farzanah Chowdhury, Managing Director and CEO, Green Delta Insurance Company Limited
Khadiza Marium, Head of Women Entrepreneur Cell, SME Banking, Brac Bank
Mubruka Nadee, Unit Head, Green Delta Capital Limited
Naima Sultana, Incharge of Bancassurance, Insurance Company
Sadaf Nasir, Incharge of Brand and Communications, Green Delta Insurance Company Limited
Shaila Abedin, Head of Affluent Segment & Women Banking, Prime Bank
Tabien Kamal, Country HR Director, DHL Bangladesh
Touhida Shiropa, Founder, Mental Health Startup

Participants at the India Roundtable held at Eden Park Hotel, New Delhi on June 29, 2024

Anusha Sethi, Senior Manager-HRD, Newgen Software

Celine George, HR and OD Consultant

Gaurav Gupta, Deputy Managing Director, MG Motors India

Kaushik Dutta, Chartered Accountant and Director on Boards

Krishnendu B Sarkar, Independent, Chartered Accountant

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Rinika Grover, Head Sustainability and CSR, Apollo Tyres Ltd

Sanjay Chaturvedi, Founder, People 2 Value

Shikha Halder, Chairperson Radiation Oncologist at Sir Ganga Ram Hospital

Sunandan Bhanja Chaudhury, Client Partner at Pedersen and Partners

Surender Jeet Raj, Executive Vice President (Global Business Strategy and HR), Newgen Software

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Executive Summary



Executive Summary

Women have made great strides over the last several decades, in achieving professional success, however, biases continue to exist that prevent women from fully exploring their capabilities. The world is thus deprived of the untapped potential of almost half the world's population.

It is in this context that this study is undertaken; with the objective of finding actionable solutions to *bridging the gender gap in the formal sector* in select countries in Asia with a particular emphasis on their **access to 4Ws, viz, work, wealth, welfare and well-being**. The countries covered in this study are **Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka** in South Asia, which are compared with a better performing country in South East Asia, viz **Thailand**.

Thailand is an anchor country for the study, as it emerges as a leader in economic development in this region particularly with regard to representation and participation of women in the workforce. It is a good exemplar due to several factors, including its robust economy and per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP), its performance in the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report (GGR), etc., vis-à-vis other countries. It thus offers a basis for understanding the complex interplay between economic prosperity, gender equality initiatives and women's participation in the formal sector.

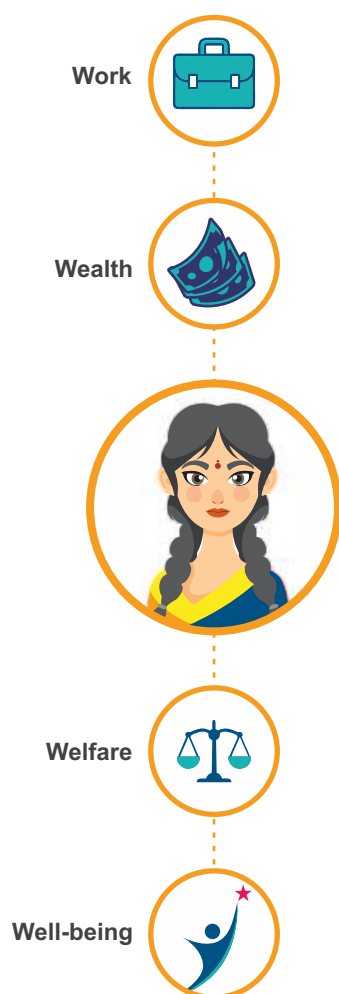
Background and Objectives

Gender equality and women's economic empowerment have emerged as crucial facets of social and economic development. The empowerment of women not only fosters individual growth but also propels nations toward prosperity. It has the potential to positively impact economic and social growth, enhance education and health of the future generations and is a key pillar of sustainable development as acknowledged by UN (United Nations).

Women's economic empowerment is a critical driver of gender equality. It not only promotes equitable economic growth, it also assists businesses by enhancing organisational performance. However, there is a long way to go in realising full economic empowerment. Parity in women's participation in public life remains elusive, and according to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Report 2024, in management positions, at current rates, parity will require another 176 years.

Given that women are more likely than men to spend resources on supporting their families and communities, an adverse impact on women's employment has a cascading impact on the welfare of households, communities and economies (World Bank 2012).

The report also says that women carry an unfair burden of unpaid domestic and care work, spending 2.5 times more hours a day on it than men. Crisis situations like economic downturns and pandemic like conditions further impact women disproportionately, affecting their access to resources and work.



South Asia and South East Asia: Countries Selected for the Study



This study seeks to delve into the complexities of gender inequality and the lack of economic empowerment, with a focus on **Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka**. By examining these countries' performance in terms of per capita GDP and gender gaps in various socio-economic domains including economic empowerment, literacy rates, unemployment rates, etc, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complicated challenges that women face due to their diverse economic, cultural and historical backgrounds.

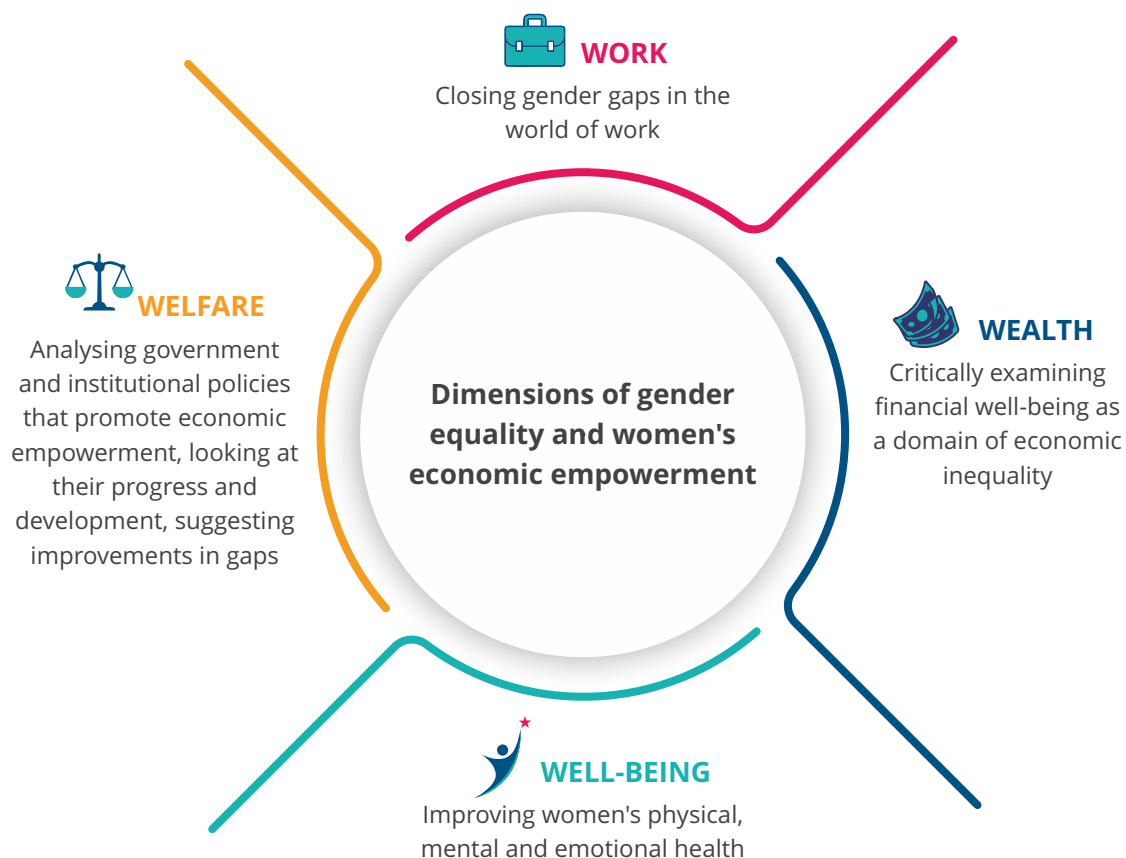
Among the emerging economies in South Asia, **India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh** appear as representative examples due to common social and economic challenges that significantly impact women's engagement in the formal workforce. Issues such as gender stereotypes, discriminatory practices, unequal access to financial services and an uneven distribution of unpaid work are common themes in these countries that collectively contribute to lower rates of female participation in the labour market.

To provide a comparative perspective, we also include **Thailand**, a country in South East Asia that has shown better performance in various gender equality metrics, to uncover potential best practices and lessons that can be adopted. Thailand ranks 65th among 146 countries based on 4 sub-indices in the WEF's 2024 GGR report. It has a high per capita GDP attributed to a well-developed manufacturing sector and a thriving tourism industry. A high female literacy rate and low unemployment rate are a further testament to its economic performance, particularly vis-à-vis women in the formal sector. Thailand has also aligned its legislative and policy framework with international principles and instruments dedicated to fostering gender equality and economic empowerment for women.

In this context, Thailand emerges as a compelling model for study and which will facilitate a comparative analysis with the other countries in the **South Asian region**. An in-depth examination of Thailand's successes holds the promise of offering valuable insights to other countries seeking to enhance women's participation in the formal sector and creating a framework for sustainable progress and empowerment.

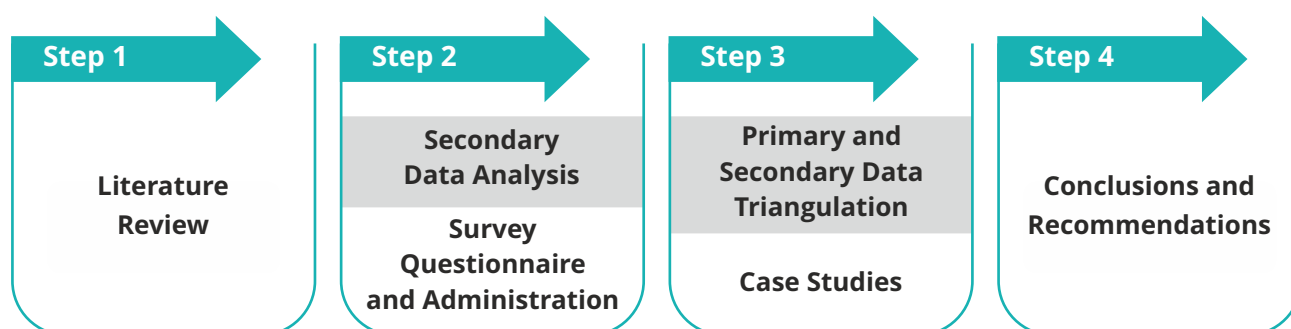
The 4Ws - Work, Wealth, Welfare and Well-being

For a better understanding of the objectives, this study focuses on four key dimensions of empowerment and equality, the 4Ws, namely **work, wealth, welfare and well-being**. These 4Ws guide our research and are at the heart of this study. They cover the complicated issues faced by women and provide a structured approach toward an attempt to bridging the gender gap in the formal sector in the four countries in these regions.

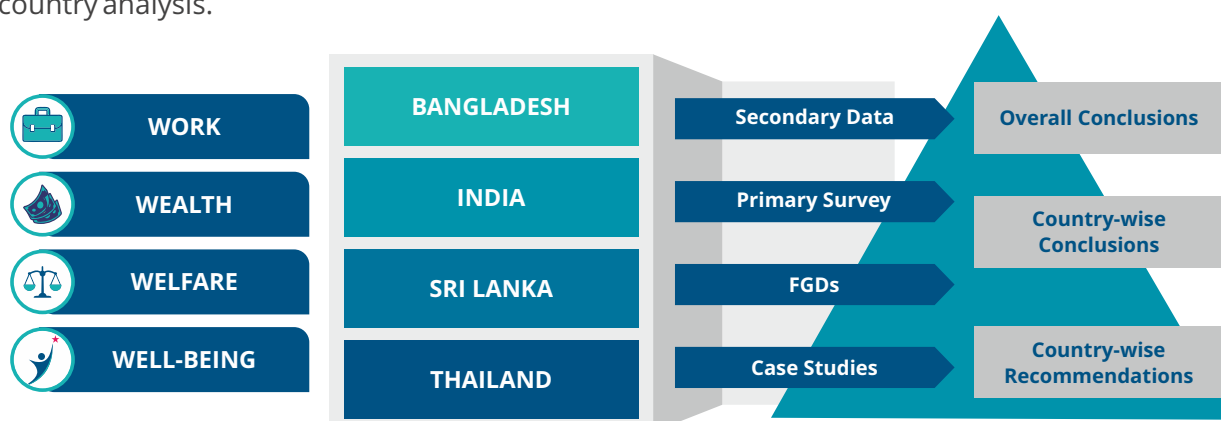


Methodology and Approach

This study aims to answer the research questions through an analysis of primary and secondary data, juxtaposed to culminate in the triangulation of all sources of information / data and arrive at meaningful conclusions regarding the position of gender parity and women's economic empowerment in each country. To this end the study adopted a broad 4-step approach.



Data triangulation is a method involving cross-verification of information from multiple sources. By integrating primary survey data with indicators from secondary sources, the report provides a **comprehensive overall conclusion and country-wise conclusions** which facilitate a comparative country analysis.



By identifying strengths and weaknesses of different countries in the four parameters of work, wealth, welfare and well-being, the study seeks to understand the reasons for the existing gender inequality and lack of economic empowerment. The goal is to provide valuable insights and recommendations for empowerment of women to improve their participation in the formal sector.

Policy implementation by governments and proactive implementation by industry of practises that foster inclusion and encourage the economic empowerment of women, etc., will lead to achieving gender parity quicker and meeting the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as harness the contribution of women in the economy and society.

Country Analysis Bangladesh



WORK

- ▶ **Gender disparities in education** remain a significant challenge.
- ▶ Women often **face intrusive questions about marital status at job interviews**, and male-centric job descriptions contribute to gender discrimination and keep them from the workforce.
- ▶ **Family and personal responsibilities limit women's ability** to pursue further training or education.
- ▶ As per the World Bank, on an average, **men earn 35.8% more per hour than women**.
- ▶ Early marriage and childbirth significantly increase caregiving responsibilities. The **absence of paternity leave** only perpetuates traditional gender roles, placing the burden of caregiving disproportionately on women and limiting their ability to fully engage in economic activities.



WEALTH

- ▶ **Gender biases and stereotypes** are the top reason why fewer women opt to run businesses.
- ▶ Low educational attainment levels, the inability to work outside the home and lack of gender equality in property rights, including absence of independent sources of income are among the factors that impede the growth of women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh.
- ▶ Government initiatives aim to promote gender equality and support women's entrepreneurship. However, **low utilisation** suggests practical barriers persist.
- ▶ Female entrepreneurs face significant barriers in accessing formal credit, with **88% relying on informal sources of credit**.
- ▶ 55% of business owners participate in trade or industry associations, 86% reported that their contributions are dismissed or ignored.
- ▶ **Sons and daughters do not have equal inheritance rights**, limiting women's access to capital, necessary for creating wealth and pursuing business interests.



WELFARE

- ▶ Only 9% of the surveyed women have utilised any government policy promoting entrepreneurship or workforce participation, indicating a **significant gap in awareness and outreach**.
- ▶ **Women hold only 21% of parliamentary seats** and 10% of ministerial positions, despite historical achievements in political leadership.



WELL-BEING

- ▶ **Women bear a disproportionate burden of domestic chores** and caregiving, impacting their ability to engage in paid work and pursuing personal development opportunities.
- ▶ **Despite existing anti-sexual harassment laws, enforcement remains a challenge**. 35% of Women in Business report experiencing sexual harassment during business interactions.



Policy Recommendations for Bangladesh

WORK

Government

- ▶ **Diversifying** beyond the readymade garments (RMG) sector.
- ▶ **Removing entry barriers** imposed on employment of women in jobs deemed dangerous or in an industrial job and consent required for working at night.
- ▶ **Monitoring of existing equal remuneration law.**
- ▶ Amending the law to explicitly **prohibit dismissal of women based on pregnancy.**
- ▶ **Monitoring the age of marriage** and taking cognisance of under-age marriage.

Corporates

- ▶ **Fair recruitment practises** by corporates prohibiting intrusive personal questions during interviews, etc.

WEALTH

Government

- ▶ **Inheritance law reforms** through national political and social consensus.
- ▶ **Financial inclusion schemes** to encourage women to open bank accounts, save and invest, and create more awareness about existing schemes.
- ▶ More schemes to **incentivise women entrepreneurs.**

WELFARE

Government

- ▶ **Awareness and dissemination of information about existing government policies** aimed at encouraging women's participation in the workforce.

WELL-BEING

Government

- ▶ Legislation of prevention and **punishment of sexual harassment.**

The economic empowerment of women in Bangladesh remains a critical yet challenging goal. Despite significant socio-economic progress and various governmental initiatives, women continue to face barriers in education, workforce participation and entrepreneurship. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts through improved policy implementation, by enhancing access to education and credit, and promoting gender equality in all social spheres. By closing these gender gaps in workforce participation rates, Bangladesh can unlock substantial economic potential, up to 40% of the current GDP and pave the way for inclusive and sustainable development.

Country Analysis India



WORK

- ▶ Despite women holding a higher percentage of undergraduate, master's and Ph.D. degrees, they constitute less than 20% of the labour force in urban areas (2020).
- ▶ Women often face **intrusive questions about marital status and male-centric words** in job descriptions which act as barriers to joining the workforce. 58% of the primary survey respondents said they faced such questions.
- ▶ In India, **skilling women is particularly challenging** due to their predominance in low-skill, low-paying jobs without social protection or job security, with 94% of all working women participating in the informal economy, where gender discrimination and wage disparities are more pronounced than in the formal sector.
- ▶ **Only 37% women use the internet compared to 53% men.**
- ▶ Women earn significantly less than men, with **a wage gap estimated at about 33%.**
- ▶ Women **face significant challenges at individual, family, workplace and societal levels**, such as guilt, lack of family support, unsupportive work environments, lack of infrastructure like creche and elder care, and deep-seated social norms which hinder their progress to leadership positions. Paternity leave is not legally mandated, nor is parental leave.



WEALTH

- ▶ Only **21% of women are financially literate** compared to 29% of men.
- ▶ **Women accumulate only 64% of the wealth that men do** by the time of retirement. This is primarily on account of gender pay gaps, limited career progression and financial literacy gaps. In the primary survey 55% of the respondents concur that women accumulate less wealth over their lifetimes.
- ▶ Social norms that prevent distribution of wealth equally to daughters, despite generally equal inheritance laws, directly impacting women's wealth accumulation abilities.
- ▶ **Female entrepreneurs face significant barriers in accessing formal credit**, with 47% reporting difficulties and 82% relying on informal sources of credit.



WELFARE

- ▶ **Only 13% of survey respondents have availed of any government policies** or schemes promoting entrepreneurship or workforce participation among women.
- ▶ **Safety** concerns significantly limit women's mobility in Indian cities. About 56% find public transport unsafe, and many have faced harassment.
- ▶ There is **relatively low representation in India in parliamentary bodies**, as reflected in the GGR 2024. However, at grassroots political level women accounted for 46% of the positions as on September 2020.
- ▶ Despite some progress in women's representation in corporate and political leadership in India, considerable gender disparities remain.

WELL-BEING

- ▶ In India, **women spend 335 minutes a day on unpaid domestic work**, as compared to the 40 minutes spent by their male counterparts.
- ▶ Despite legal protections, workplace safety for women in India remains a major issue, with very few women reporting instances of sexual harassment.
- ▶ **Healthcare:** 75% of the survey respondents said that they go for **regular health check-ups**.

Policy Recommendations for India

WORK

Government

- ▶ **Removing entry barriers** in certain industrial jobs or jobs deemed dangerous, as well as working at night.
- ▶ **Affordable and monitored day care and elder care facilities** by government and corporates.
- ▶ **Strengthening enforcement of the equal remuneration law** to remove gender based pay gaps that currently exist.

Corporates

- ▶ **Adopting fair recruitment practices/processes** that prohibit male-centric job descriptions in job postings, intrusive personal questions during interviews.

WEALTH

Government

- ▶ **Reducing disparities in wealth accumulation** through monitoring of existing laws on equal pay, financial literacy training, supporting work-life balance measures (flexible hours, parental leave).
- ▶ **Targeted awareness programmes** to bring a cultural shift towards shared domestic responsibilities.
- ▶ **Addressing the issue of limited access to credit**, especially legislation explicitly prohibiting gender-based discrimination; and greater outreach of government finances.



WELFARE

Government

- ▶ **Awareness and dissemination of information** about existing government policies aimed at encouraging women's participation in the workforce.
- ▶ **Review impact of mandating one woman director** on company boards as a step toward enhancing the proportion of women's representation on boards.

Corporates

- ▶ Increasing representation of women in corporate leadership roles.



WELL-BEING

Government

- ▶ Improving **mobility infrastructure** design to make it more women friendly and safe.



Women continue to face significant barriers to economic participation in India due to educational disparities and systemic gender biases which leads to a low labour force participation rate. Pay gaps, limited access to formal credit and a digital divide further exacerbate the challenges for women. Social norms and inadequate support systems for working mothers impede their career advancement. While some progress has been made in representation at grassroots political levels, significant efforts are still needed to address the pervasive gender disparities across all dimensions of work, wealth, welfare and well-being in India. Comprehensive policy interventions and cultural shifts are necessary to create an equitable and supportive environment for women to thrive.

Country Analysis Sri Lanka



WORK

- ▶ Insights from the primary survey reveals underlying issues in entering and staying in the workforce. **Women often face intrusive and personal questions** in the recruitment process.
- ▶ **Up-skilling and re-skilling** are crucial to stay relevant in the workforce. Women face peculiar hurdles due to social and related constraints, primarily, juggling professional responsibilities with family commitments, that impact up-skilling/re-skilling.
- ▶ **Gender-based pay and promotion gaps** are particularly prevalent in the private sector in Sri Lanka.
- ▶ **Most “family responsibilities” fall on women** of the household, holding them back in their careers. The absence of a paternity leave policy is also a critical challenge that women face in the workforce.



WEALTH

- ▶ Economic decision-making and personal financial management are impacted **by financial literacy levels**, which are low in Sri Lanka. The need for integrating formal comprehensive financial literacy training into high school and college curricula in general, but also specifically for women/girls, was a recurring suggestion during in-person interviews.
- ▶ While there are **limited credit policies for entrepreneurs, even these are not easily accessible**. However, as indicated by the primary survey, it is a positive sign that very few women rely on informal sources of credit.



WELFARE

- ▶ Despite some government schemes aimed at promoting female entrepreneurship less than 1% of primary survey respondents have availed **government initiatives and policies aimed at promoting entrepreneurship or workforce participation**.
- ▶ **Sexual harassment on public transportation** is a pervasive issue in Sri Lanka, significantly affecting women's mobility.
- ▶ The representation of women is notably low in **political leadership**. Interestingly, about half of those surveyed said that women in political leadership have not been effective in advocating women's needs.
- ▶ **Women are under-represented in managerial positions** despite higher education levels and the presence in mid- to high-skilled jobs. Lower likelihood of employment in managerial and supervisory roles can result from barriers to female promotion and a glass ceiling in the labour market.



WELL-BEING

- ▶ According to a survey conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics in 2017, it was found that **87.3% of women carried out unpaid care and unpaid domestic work within a household.**
- ▶ **Sexual harassment** at the workplace is criminalized under Section 345 of the Penal Code (Amendment) Act No. 22 of 1995. However, implementation of the law appears ineffective, reflected in the rising cases of sexual harassment.



Policy Recommendations for Sri Lanka

WORK

Government

- ▶ **Removing entry barriers** that prohibit women from working at night and in certain industrial sectors and introducing legislation that explicitly prohibits discrimination in employment based on gender.
- ▶ **Equal remuneration law** that explicitly seeks equal remuneration for all for work of equal value, irrespective of gender.
- ▶ **Affordable and monitored day care facilities** by government and corporates.



WEALTH

Government

- ▶ **More entrepreneurship initiatives** incentivising women in business, providing subsidies for rent, capital equipment and certifications, and explicitly prohibiting by law discrimination in access to credit based on gender.
- ▶ **Policies that support local manufacturers and production**, by making them competitive and attractive.



WELFARE

Government

- ▶ **Building trust in government policies** for women's economic empowerment.
- ▶ **Infrastructure and sexual harassment:** providing greater security in public transport to prevent sexual harassment, the most prevalent form of violence against women in Sri Lanka.



WELL-BEING

Government

- ▶ **Comprehensive national awareness campaigns**, to educate women on the importance of regular health check-ups and preventive care.



Sri Lanka has performed well in indicators related to education and health. However, the female labour force participation rate remains low due to legislative barriers, unpaid care responsibilities, gender-based discrimination and lack of government support in terms of schemes and initiatives aimed at improving the participation rate. This gap has further widened due to various economic crises that have hit the country in recent years. Strengthening policies to support women's participation in the workforce and addressing legislative barriers, as well as effective communication of existing schemes and programmes promoting women in business and employment, and improving infrastructure support related to caregiving and mobility are crucial for achieving gender parity. These changes will unlock women's full economic potential and contribute significantly to the country's development.

Country Analysis Thailand

Even as we study Thailand as a comparative country to learn from, the study found some gaps in complete gender parity in the formal workforce; while the other three countries can emulate several ideas from Thailand, we offer some suggestions for Thailand to further improve gender parity in the formal workforce.

WORK

- ▶ Section 38 and Section 39 of the Labour Protection Act **restricts women from taking up some jobs** under certain hazardous conditions.
- ▶ Between 2010 and 2020, the value of **Thailand's digital services sector expanded by 37%, but the number of digital workers only rose by 26% indicating the need for up-skilling to meet this demand.**
- ▶ Thailand's Ministry of Labour mandates at least 30% women in training of new recruits and 40% training programmes for independent professionals. Additional support through infrastructure and training upgrades have also been mandated.
- ▶ In 2020, **gender based pay gaps were 11%** and consequently, women's earnings were 89.1 cents for every dollar earned by men.
- ▶ Comprehensive policies are in place under the **Labour Laws providing maternity leave. However there is no mandatory (paid) paternity leave** in place.

WEALTH

- ▶ **Thai women do not lag behind men in financial literacy** levels.
- ▶ There are many policies in place to **support entrepreneurship**. These policies help to foster an entrepreneurial ecosystem, however most of them are gender neutral, and are not specific to women.
- ▶ There are policies in place to support female entrepreneur's access to formal credit, and 67% of Thai women entrepreneurs surveyed said that they have access to formal credit. However, 46% also said that they have had to rely on informal sources of credit.

WELFARE

- ▶ Thailand's government has implemented policies to promote gender equality and support women's participation in the workforce. However, only 7% of the Women in Business (WIB) and 9% of Women in Employment (WIE) respondents in the primary survey said that they have availed of any schemes.
- ▶ Gender representation in **political participation in Thailand is one of the poorest globally**. Thailand ranks at 102 in the political empowerment sub-index of the WEF GGR of 2024.
- ▶ In corporate leadership, **Thailand has a higher percentage of women in senior leadership roles compared to both the Asia-Pacific region and the global average.**

WELL-BEING

- ▶ Women dedicate 3.2 times more time to unpaid domestic and care work compared to men.
- ▶ In 2007, the Thai government introduced the Universal Healthcare Coverage Scheme, wherein healthcare became free. Under this scheme, the beneficiaries are entitled to free medical treatment for most diseases.
- ▶ Thailand does not have strong anti-sexual harassment policies in place.



Policy Recommendations for Thailand

WORK

Government

- ▶ **Removing entry barriers** that prevent women from working in certain industries and jobs and **also barriers that impose restrictions on pregnant women** working under certain conditions.
- ▶ **Developing the care economy as a potential avenue** for employment generation given the growing aging population in Thailand.
- ▶ **Publishing sex-disaggregated data** on employment which will help in the drafting of policies focussed on increasing the participation of women in the formal workforce.
- ▶ **Ensuring pay gaps** do not widen through monitoring mechanisms.
- ▶ **Extending the public transport system network** and making it more affordable in rural and sub-urban regions to facilitate up-skilling / re-skilling since mobility was a key issue cited for the inability to up-skill/re-skill.



WEALTH

Government

- ▶ Legislation explicitly **prohibiting discrimination in access to credit based on gender**.



WELFARE

Government

- ▶ **Improving women's participation in political leadership** and decision making roles.



WELL-BEING

Government

- ▶ **Stronger laws on sexual harassment** removing all ambiguities related to definitions, operation and penalties.

Corporates

- ▶ **Mental health awareness** to de-stigmatise mental health issues and encourage open conversations about mental well-being.



Thailand, predominantly a patriarchal society with certain matriarchal characteristics, sees the oldest male typically holding authority in family and social affairs. Its economic growth and progressive gender equality initiatives have however resulted in significant improvements in women's workforce participation and leadership roles. Despite these advances, challenges remain, such as pay gaps, limited access to digital skills and low political participation. Strengthening policies to enhance financial literacy, access to credit and enforcement of strong anti-sexual harassment laws is crucial. By addressing these areas, Thailand can further bridge the gender gap, promoting a more inclusive and equitable society.

Why Thailand Stands Out



Thailand was chosen as an anchor country for our analysis of gender parity and women's economic empowerment, based on certain key indicators, viz the global gender gap report, female labour force participation rates, literacy rates, unemployment rate, GDP per capita, etc.

An in-depth examination of Thailand's successes to identify the reasons for their relative better performance, in comparison with the other countries in this study suggested that some of the reasons for Thailand's success in economically empowering women (and otherwise) are:



*CFO: Chief Financial Officer

**CEO: Chief Executive Officer

Actionable Policy Solutions Across Countries

Most countries have gender-specific legislations and policies aimed at easing the uneven playing field; however, experience tells us **that Equal Input is NOT EQUAL to Equal Output**. One of the recurring messages this study encountered in all four countries is the disproportionate burden of housework, childcare and elder care that is placed on women. Such unpaid labour is not only **not** recognised as a contribution to the economy, but the understanding that this unpaid labour is exactly what allows men to fully engage in economic activities is lacking. Yet, for women earning an income, domestic tasks are still considered her primary responsibility - impacting performance in profession and health.

Governments can play a part in altering this scenario through targeted programmes in mission mode. Unobtrusively didactic state-funded advertising and popular art that conveys messages about marriage as an equal partnership, equally shared household responsibilities being intrinsic to coupledness, and so on could be included in such programmes on traditional and new media platforms. Privately funded creators across all the arts - writers, directors, actors, painters, sculptors - should be incentivised to generate works revolving around such subjects.

The normalisation of equally shared domestic responsibilities, stay-at-home fathers, paternity leave and so on should be incorporated into school curricula at an early stage, and continue at every level in the education system.

WORK

Government

- ▶ Skill development opportunities for women employees and entrepreneurs.

Corporates

- ▶ Comprehensive paternity leave and/or parental leave policies.
- ▶ Hybrid work options available to both genders.

WEALTH

Government

- ▶ Inclusion of financial literacy in curricula.
- ▶ Tax incentives to corporates that achieve gender diversity targets.
- ▶ Tax deductions for expenses related to childcare, eldercare and other caregiving expenses.

Corporates

- ▶ Funding maternity and paternity leave.
- ▶ Inclusion of financial management in capacity building initiatives.

WELFARE

Government

- ▶ Building a robust mobility infrastructure with a gendered lens.

Corporates

- ▶ Social change through corporate gender sensitisation.

WELL-BEING

Government

- ▶ Gender studies and sensitisation as part of school curriculum.

All these routes should also be used to improve women's safety, denounce sexual violence, normalise women's leisure, and end the victim blaming and survivor shaming that pervades society.

A top-down approach is essential to attain gender parity. However, not all change can be effected at the regulatory and/or government level. 360-degree progress can be achieved only by addressing the social and cultural values ingrained in our collective psyche that have limited the advancement of women for generations. The latter requires an attitudinal shift. This means all-round change is possible only through a combination of a bottom-up and top-down approach. Organisations must also proactively work toward equality and equal opportunity in all areas and at all levels, looking beyond mere compliance requirements and diversity goals set on paper. ***Only by doing so will they truly impact the societies within which they operate.***

By integrating these recommendations into strategies and action plans, governments, corporates, civil society and every individual can drive equitable, sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

Areas for Further Research

Care ecosystem and delivery models

Designing a comprehensive gender sensitisation curriculum for all educational levels

Gender-sensitive urban planning and infrastructure

Impact of automation and changing technology on women in the workforce

Role of male allies in promoting women's economic empowerment

Impact of job mobility on pay gaps

