KEY GENDER ISSUES
Over the past few decades, most countries in Southeast Asia have experienced strong economic growth, which has led to progress towards gender equality in several areas. Most countries have reached gender parity in primary school enrolment, and more girls than boys now enrol in secondary schools in the region as a whole. Maternal mortality rates have halved. Economic opportunities have increased, particularly for young, more highly educated women. However, the region still faces key gender gaps in the areas of economic empowerment, voice and unequal workloads. As countries decentralize government services to local authorities, many have adopted equality measures regarding political representation, with varying results. The region is also affected by floods, droughts and tropical cyclones. These climatic events, which are exacerbated by climate change, severely threaten the livelihoods and lives of poor people living in rural areas who have limited capacity to adapt. Women are particularly vulnerable.

Economic empowerment
Although women account for 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force on average in developing countries, they have significantly less access to and control of resources that could help them improve their productivity. Across the region, women are less likely than men to hold formal land titles. In Thailand, where women can legally own land and jointly control marital property, land titles are usually registered in the husband’s name, even when the land was obtained from the woman’s family. Female-headed households are particularly disadvantaged when it comes to land access. In Cambodia, approximately one out of every five rural households headed by single women is landless.
To address these issues, several countries – including the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam – have recently adopted gender-sensitive land reforms. In Viet Nam, the 2004 Land Law that requires joint titling has improved women’s access to loans, encouraged mutual decision-making, and offered better ways to resolve land disputes.6

As economic development increases, more women are migrating from rural to urban areas in search of better employment opportunities in the non-agricultural sector. However, they are more likely than men to work in poorly paid occupations. Throughout the region, women earn less than men, regardless of the sector. In Viet Nam, most women work in the informal sector and are not covered by social protection measures. Women who do work in the formal sector receive between 70-80 per cent of the average male wages.7

Voice and participation
Women in Southeast Asia have more decision-making power at the household level compared with women in other developing regions. They are also more likely to have control over their own earnings. In Indonesia, 69 per cent of women who are or have been married reported that they control their own earnings; 28 per cent decide jointly with someone else, usually their husbands; and only 3 per cent reported that someone else makes the decision about how their earnings are used.8

However, women’s voice and influence in the public domain remains low. In recent years, gender mainstreaming efforts have increased women’s representation in formal community and local decision-making bodies, but not in leadership positions. In Cambodia, the patriarchal nature of society discourages women from participating in decision-making processes, as they are expected to fully continue their traditional household and caregiving responsibilities.9

Many types of rural organizations supported by the Government of Cambodia have rules mandating female representation on leadership committees or are subject to policies that promote women’s participation. Despite this, most leaders in these organizations are men.

Workloads and benefits
Women are expected to take full responsibility for domestic and caregiving activities, which limits their economic opportunities. In rural areas, poor infrastructure and lack of childcare options increase the time women spend on domestic chores. For example, in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, on an average day, men living in households with small children spend six hours a day on household and productive work, of which less than one hour is household work. Women spend more than nine hours a day working, of which six hours is household work.10

IFAD STORIES FROM THE FIELD
Women take on non-traditional jobs in the Philippines11
The IFAD-supported Northern Mindanao Community Initiatives and Resource Management Project (NMCIREMP) (2003-2010) in the Philippines focused primarily on helping women improve their living conditions. The project provided over 30 potable water systems to reduce the hours women spent fetching water, which freed up their time for productive activities. It also initiated a poverty alleviation fund and set up more than 800 self-help groups.

One such group, in Barangay Mesli in the Province of Agusan del Sur, started out with 20 members, most of whom had no earnings and were reliant on their husbands’ income. The women took the name Mesli for their group because it sounded like ‘measly’, which is how they described their lives before they started working together with IFAD’s support. With training in bookkeeping, accounting and leadership, and financial support, the women set up a sari-sari store, selling household items such as snacks, canned goods, cooking oil, salt and sugar. The store quickly became a success thanks to their new skills and the good cooperation among the members.

IFAD GENDER POLICY
Strategic objective 1: Promote economic empowerment to enable rural women and men to have equal opportunity to participate in, and benefit from, profitable economic activities.

“The NMCIREMP noticed us because our project was a male-oriented one but operated and managed by women ... we were doing vehicle repair work, and car and motorcycle wash. We also offered lower prices compared to other shops in the municipality. We hired men to do the more heavy and technical tasks that we have not been trained in.”

Annabelle Rensulat
Bookkeeper and Core Officer, Mesli Women.
Armed with confidence and self-reliance, the women developed additional plans. They continued to attend seminars and trainings conducted through the project and, with additional funding, they opened a machine shop that offered fabrication and trading of motorcycle parts, welding and other metal works, and car washing. Initially the women planned to involve men in their new venture. However, as men had to spend most of their time farming, the women were trained in welding, changing tyres and operating the machines. At first male customers were sceptical that women could do ‘men’s work’, but the quality of the services soon proved otherwise.

Three years after the project closed, the store and the machine shop are thriving businesses. They have improved the women’s incomes and benefited the entire community, saving everyone money and time that they had previously spent travelling to other areas for these services. The Mesli group is also going strong and now has a new project. With the profits from their other activities, the women have leased a quarter hectare of land and planted 250 rubber trees, which are ready for tapping this year. They plan to open group membership to men and involve them in their projects, because as the chairperson explained: “We want the men to feel that sustainable development is possible only with the full and equal support of both men and women.”

**Youth forums promote gender equality in Cambodia**

The Cambodian Ministry of Women’s Affairs organized several youth forums on gender equality in 2011 with financial support from IFAD. The forums aimed to increase understanding about gender equality among young people and to learn more about their perceptions and priorities. Young people play an important role in bridging gender gaps because more than 60 per cent of the country’s population is under 24. The forums invited 1,500 people, including youth representatives from four provinces and four universities and teachers. Using videos, stage performances and group discussions, they tackled topics such as women and the economy, girls’ education, maternal health, violence against women, women and HIV/AIDS, and women in decision-making roles. The young people are continuing their discussions on gender issues on Facebook, YouTube and at regular meetings. They are also planning to continue raising awareness on violence against women, including domestic violence, trafficking, sexual assault and acid throwing. These crimes are seldom punished.

"What the speakers presented and shared really encouraged me to review and change my actions and thoughts on women. Men and women share the same value and dignity, and they deserve everything equally."

Male student from Battambang, Cambodia.

The Philippines: choosing fruit at the market in Tayabas City.
Sharing domestic duties in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic

The Women’s Union of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic has developed a tool to increase gender equality within the family and reduce poverty. Known in Lao as *sam sang*, which means three good developments or three goods, it has three areas of focus: (i) Good citizen; (ii) Good development (the development of the individual and the community); and (iii) Good and happy family. The model has been piloted in about 50 districts, with initial training targeting both female and male family members and focusing on a more equitable division of labour within the household.

During monthly follow-up family visits by the Lao Women’s Union staff, women reported that after the training their husbands were spending more time doing household chores, taking care of children and, to a lesser extent, sharing tasks in productive activities. Respondents indicated that as a result, their lives had become easier and they had more free time. Women also reported that they felt more comfortable participating in village meetings and expressing their views and ideas.

To support these activities, the IFAD-funded Rural Livelihoods Improvement Programme provided gender training for government staff and village gender committees and helped develop village campaigns for gender mainstreaming. The programme also offered workshops for community members on the roles and responsibilities of women and men, as well as training of trainers workshops for the district Lao Women’s Union staff.

Easing women’s workload in Viet Nam

The IFAD-funded Rural Income Diversification Project in Tuyen Quang Province, Viet Nam (2002-2010), had a particular focus on lightening women’s workload and improving the opportunities open to them. The project offered training and workshops on issues such as division of labour in the household and the community, the prevention of domestic violence and women’s participation in decision-making processes. It also set up the Women’s Livelihood Improvement Fund specifically to meet demands expressed by women during the participatory planning process. This fund provided a wide range of facilities and equipment, including kindergartens and latrines, and scholarships for poor school children. Labour-saving devices such as threshing machines and hand pumps were also made available.

An impact survey conducted after the project had closed reported favourable changes in the balance of women’s participation in family and community activities. Men were taking on more of the domestic chores usually done by women. And women were spending less time on agricultural labour and more time going to training courses and village meetings, and on marketing produce. Importantly, women also had more free time thanks to the new clean water supply systems and the simple labour-saving devices provided by the project.
LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

The Asia and Pacific Division has implemented projects that address gender equality and women’s empowerment in different ways. Some of the lessons learned and good practices implemented in Southeast Asia include:

- **Affirmative action.** Setting targets for women’s participation in community-based organizations, decision-making bodies and leadership structures has proven to be an effective way to quickly increase women’s representation and leadership, particularly when backed by capacity-building and monitoring requirements. However, even when quotas are established, women farmers may not always be assertive in voicing their concerns. Women-only committees can provide a more comfortable platform for female members to negotiate with the rest of an organization, external partners and institutions.

- **Alternative livelihood options.** Alternative livelihood options can help women increase their incomes and boost their confidence and decision-making powers. However, these options need to be backed by practical measures to address their already heavy workloads. It may also be necessary to anticipate problems, such as domestic violence, that may result from empowering women financially.

- **Working with men and at the household level.** Engaging men in discussions about gender roles and responsibilities, and helping them to understand the importance of supporting change within the household, can help reduce women’s workloads. When there is a fairer distribution of household activities, women are able to participate in training courses and community meetings more often.

- **National gender coordinators.** Country-level gender coordinators in the Philippines and other countries who provide direct support to project design and supervision have made important contributions to gender equality outcomes (such as empowerment, labour and time use). In addition, the national gender coordinator in the Philippines, for example, played an essential role in convening national gender network meetings of IFAD-funded project staff and in producing advocacy and information materials.

- **Partnerships.** In the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, social change in gender relations was effectively brought about through close support by dedicated staff of the Lao Women’s Union.

OUTSTANDING ISSUES AND ONGOING CHALLENGES

There are a number of outstanding issues and ongoing challenges facing IFAD-supported projects in the Southeast Asia region, including:

- **Women’s voice and leadership.** More efforts are needed to strengthen women’s voice and influence in the public domain and to increase the number of women in leadership positions. Only a limited number of projects in the region made efforts to promote women’s leadership positions in community and local decision-making bodies (the second strategic objective of IFAD’s gender policy) or monitored the gender composition of group membership.

- **Reducing women’s workload.** Efforts to reduce drudgery, the third strategic objective of IFAD’s gender policy, were limited to very few projects. Women in Southeast Asia work significantly longer hours than men and spend more time on domestic activities and family care, which affects their economic opportunities. Therefore, more focus is needed on reducing women’s workload through labour-saving technologies and household-based approaches that can result in a fairer distribution of household tasks.
THE STATISTICS AND WHAT THEY SHOW

The national economies across Southeast Asia vary considerably – with GDP per capita ranging from under US$900 in Cambodia to almost US$5,000 in Thailand. As in other regions, women can expect to live longer than men – especially in Thailand and Viet Nam. With the exception of Cambodia, in countries with data, women’s literacy rates are 90 per cent or over. They are slightly behind men’s literacy rates everywhere except the Philippines (Table 1).

Countries in Southeast Asia continue to face challenges around human development and gender inequality. All countries fall below average on the Human Development Index – a composite measure of health, education and income. The Gender Inequality Index suggests that Thailand and Viet Nam fare better than other countries in addressing gender inequality in areas of reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market. On the other hand, the Social Institutions and Gender Index indicates that women in Cambodia and the Philippines face less discriminatory social institutions than those in other countries (Table 2).

Discriminatory practices continue to limit women’s access to land and loans in most countries, even where these are protected by law. Furthermore, women across the region continue to lag behind men in participation in the labour market, particularly in Indonesia and the Philippines (Table 3).

Table 1: Key development indicators across the region, 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>GDP per capita (current US$)</th>
<th>Life expectancy at birth (years) *</th>
<th>Literacy rate, ages 15+ ** Male (of males)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>897</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>66**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>3 495</td>
<td>7 1</td>
<td>90**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao People’s Democratic Republic</td>
<td>1 320</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>2 370</td>
<td>7 2</td>
<td>96***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>4 972</td>
<td>7 8</td>
<td>91*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viet Nam</td>
<td>1 407</td>
<td>7 7</td>
<td>95*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: * 2010 data; ** 2009 data; *** 2008 data.

Countries in Southeast Asia with ongoing activities supported by IFAD
### Table 3: Key gender indicators across the region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao People’s Democratic Republic</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viet Nam</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Notes: * Women’s legal and de facto rights to own and access agricultural land: 0: Women have equal legal rights with men to own and access land; 0.5: Women have the same legal rights to own and access land, but are restricted due to discriminatory practices; 1.0: Women have no or few legal rights to access or own land, or access is severely restricted by discriminatory practices.

** Women’s legal and de facto access to loans and credit: 0: Women have equal rights to access credit and bank loans with men; 0.5: Women have rights to access some kind of credit (e.g. microcredit), or have equal rights but face discrimination in accessing bank loans and credit; 1.0: Women have few or no rights to access bank loans or credit or access is severely restricted by discriminatory practices.
KEY RESOURCES


