

# Toward Gender Equality: Progress and Challenges

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Next year, 2015, marks 20 years since the United Nations held its fourth World Conference on Women, unanimously adopting the landmark Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPFA) for women's advancement and empowerment. Coincidentally, 2015 also marks the target year for meeting the globally endorsed Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The third MDG, Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, is the explicit gender equality goal. How far have we come on delivering the promises made in the BPFA and the MDGs to improve the lives of women and girls?

The Asia-Pacific region has made impressive strides over the last two decades. Today we have more girls in schools, fewer women dying in childbirth, more women in wage employment outside agriculture, and more women in national parliaments and decision-making bodies. Today the region is certainly a better place for women and girls.

## Tasks Remain to Tackle

As we approach 2015, the region can celebrate moving the gender equality agenda forward. But while progress is noted, much more remains to be done. We still have too many women dying in childbirth; too many women and girls suffering from malnutrition; too many women without jobs and incomes; too many girls not completing secondary education; and too many women subjected to gender-based violence. The Asia-Pacific region has some of the worst gender indicators in the world, especially "missing girls," honor killings, dowry deaths, early and child marriage, gender-based violence, and trafficking of women and girls. The gender equality agenda remains unfinished business.

JICA's development assistance has undoubtedly made a significant contribution to the region's success in narrowing gender gaps. JICA has helped to reduce gender gaps in education; built hospitals and trained health workers to deliver critical health services for women and children; supported income-earning opportunities; installed water supply in rural areas to reduce women's time poverty and improve health; and, through humanitarian and disaster-relief programs, helped to cushion the impact of shocks and disasters on women and their families.

It is encouraging to see that JICA is also tackling some of the more difficult and sensitive regional issues, such as trafficking of women and girls. With increasing globalization, improving physical connectivity, and greater movement of people across borders, the potential grows for increased trafficking. JICA is strengthening collaboration among Mekong countries to take a coordinated and unified approach to tackling this risk.

## The Potential of Greater Gender Focus

Much of JICA's assistance for gender equality has been through bilateral grant assistance. In contrast, JICA's lending is directed at infrastructure development. Moving forward, JICA might consider forging closer synergies between the lending and grant programs. Making infrastructure work better for women and girls could be given more prominence in JICA's lending program. Rural roads, water supply and sanitation, urban mass transit, rural electrification, and urban development programs can go a long way toward improving and providing faster, easier access to schools, hospitals, and markets for women and girls; reducing women's time poverty; improving access to jobs and income earning opportunities; and supporting women's physical mobility and ensuring the safety and security of public transport systems. Indeed, infrastructure is not gender neutral.

About 18 months ago, JICA's gender team invited me to Tokyo to deliver a presentation on designing more gender-inclusive infrastructure projects. I was pleasantly surprised by the large number of JICA staff (mostly engineers and men) who attended. Some were surprised that the Asian Development Bank's infrastructure lending integrates gender equality concerns. JICA is encouraged to take up the challenge of designing and implementing more gender-inclusive infrastructure projects in its lending portfolio. Some of the ADB's experiences and lessons can be drawn upon; joint gender capacity building for staff in this area could be considered. While direct support for women's projects is needed to close remaining gender gaps, a dual approach of targeted projects and gender mainstreaming across all projects and programs is required to fast-track and accelerate progress on gender equality.

