

ADVANCING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES



Throughout Asia, legal and customary barriers limit women's ability to fully participate in and benefit from economic pursuits. Even where laws establish equity for women, implementation and enforcement are often lax. Discrimination against women in the economic sphere affects women's lives in critical ways, such as owning and inheriting property, receiving alimony and child support, traveling abroad, receiving lower wages than men for the same work, and being unjustly dismissed — such as for pregnancy. When women's economic rights and opportunities are ensured, women, their families, and societies prosper. The Asia Foundation has had a dedicated program to help women improve their economic status across the Asia-Pacific region for over a decade. Foundation programs promote women's economic opportunities by advancing their ability to:

- Own property and inherit family assets
- Access credit and start businesses
- Hold government accountable for implementing laws and policies that promote economic growth and ensure women's equal economic opportunities
- Advocate employer compliance with labor laws that protect worker rights
- Acquire marketable skills
- Know and claim their legal rights

AFGHANISTAN: The Foundation supports vocational training for destitute widows in Kunduz province. Foundation partner, the Khahan Improvement Organization, provides training to women in skills that will enable them to find employment in the local economy. The Foundation also supports vocational training for older girls to help them earn a living once they leave school.

BANGLADESH: The Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) provides legal education, counseling, court representation, and referral of

cases to an alternative dispute resolution mechanism based on the traditional *shalish* model. With Foundation support, BLAST established the first-ever specialty legal service clinic in Bangladesh focusing specifically on the economic rights of industrial workers. More than 1,000 women workers in Narayanganj — Bangladesh's busiest trade center — are now aware of their rights and labor laws, grievance mechanisms, formal court procedures, and available support resources, and have improved their negotiating position with employers to oppose discriminatory practices. Nari Uddug Kendra trained more than 5,000 women likely to be affected by the expiration of the Multi-Fiber Agreement in effective job searching or prospects for safe migration to overseas employment.

CAMBODIA: Many Cambodian women are unaware of the need to ensure their economic security by registering births, marriages, and deaths in their family. In the case of death of their spouse or divorce, women who have not registered their marriages have no legal claim to inherit property or receive alimony or child support. Following a Foundation-supported advocacy campaign by Women for Prosperity, the government of Cambodia eliminated penalties for late registration of births and marriages, eliminated fees for registration of births and deaths, reduced marriage registration fees, and provided mobile registration units. These changes, combined with an awareness campaign, resulted in a dramatic surge of women's registration over a six-month period — an important step enabling Khmer women to claim their legal rights. The advocacy campaign also resulted in changes to the draft civil code that strengthen women's legal rights to child support and penalize polygamy.

CHINA: The Foundation supports policy reform dialogues on the rights of migrant women workers in China. Grants to three migrant working women

THE ASIA FOUNDATION

In Afghanistan, the Foundation supports vocational training for destitute widows and other poor women in the war-ravaged Kunduz province.

In China, the Foundation supports policy reform dialogues on the rights of migrant women workers.

In Indonesia, the Foundation educates women business owners on the benefits of registering their businesses in their own names and how to register at local one-stop licensing centers.

In Vietnam, the Foundation supports micro-credit programs to enable poor and disadvantaged women including trafficking survivors, to improve their livelihoods or start and grow businesses.

service projects in the Pearl River Delta have enabled those workers to access health, educational, personal counseling, and legal aid services. The Foundation builds on these programs by organizing and supporting the development of worker-friendly labor rights and labor law educational and awareness materials and provides scholarships to help women factory workers secure better economic opportunities through education. The Foundation is taking lessons learned from its Pearl River Delta projects to implement a major nationwide initiative in worker protection and labor rights education.

INDONESIA: In Indonesia, where women own 35 percent of micro- and small enterprises, many woman entrepreneurs register their businesses in their husband's name. They then encounter difficulties taking out a loan or risk losing their business in the case of divorce or the death of their husband. The Foundation supports the Indonesian Women's Business Association to educate women entrepreneurs in six locations in Java, Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and Bali about the benefits of and procedure for registering their businesses in their own names at local one-stop business licensing centers. The Foundation also supports Nasyiatul Aisyiyah, the women's wing of the mass-based Muslim organization Muhammadiyah, to organize woman business owners in East Java to improve their knowledge of financial institutions and how to access credit to grow their businesses.

NEPAL: Although the 1990 Constitution contains special provisions for gender equality, implementing legislation is inadequate in Nepal. Loopholes in the property rights law prevent women from using, investing, and inheriting property. Discriminatory legal provisions within employment laws affect women's options and employment conditions. As a result of Foundation-supported advocacy by local groups, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs repealed a discriminatory provision requiring women applying for a passport to get permission from a husband or other male relative. The government also reduced the fee women must pay to register property. This has contributed substantially to increasing women's land ownership. As a result of public interest litigation filed by Foundation partner, Pro Public, sexual

harassment is receiving official attention in Nepal for the first time. The Supreme Court issued a directive order to the government to formulate a law protecting women from sexual harassment.

VIETNAM: In cooperation with the Vietnam Women's Union and the Center for Education Promotion and Empowerment of Women, the Foundation supports micro-credit programs to enable poor and disadvantaged women, including trafficking survivors, to improve their livelihoods or start and grow businesses. The Foundation also supports legal aid services to trafficking victims, who often find themselves in dire economic circumstances upon their return home. Through the Provincial Legal Aid Centers and their district branches, victims of trafficking are receiving legal aid and assistance in reinstating their land and/or house, re-registering their citizenship, and obtaining birth certificates for their children. Finally, the Foundation partnered with the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor to assess women's awareness of labor law and strengthen enforcement of the Labor Code. The Foundation also worked with the labor federations of Ho Chi Minh City and Binh Duong province to educate female workers in the textile and footwear industries on their legal labor rights.

ASIA-PACIFIC REGION: The expiration of the Multi-Fiber Agreement (MFA) in 2004 has potentially dire consequences for millions of women who make up the majority of workers in the garment industry. To help Asian countries understand the impact of MFA expiration, the Foundation organized a workshop in 2004 to inform policymakers from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka of reforms needed to allay negative impact from the changed trade environment. Following this workshop, advocacy by Foundation partners in Bangladesh resulted in the government of Bangladesh establishing a special unit for retrenched workers under the Export Promotion Board, obligating approximately \$3 million to assist retrenched workers, and allocating approximately \$5 million for training and job creation in alternative sectors for retrenched workers.

The Asia Foundation is a private, non-profit, non-governmental organization working to advance mutual interests in the United States and the Asia-Pacific region. It is funded by contributions from corporations, foundations, individuals, and governmental organizations in the U.S., Europe, and Asia, and an annual appropriation from the U.S. Congress. Through its programs, the Foundation builds leadership, improves policies, and strengthens institutions to foster greater openness and shared prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region.



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