Women in Asia

For more than 60 years, The Asia Foundation has empowered women and girls across the Asia-Pacific region. Through our Women’s Empowerment Program, we have transformed the lives of thousands of women and girls through evidence-based programs that focus on three key areas: expanding women’s economic opportunities, increasing women’s rights and security, and advancing women’s political participation. The Women’s Empowerment Program also pursues an integrated approach that promotes gender equality across all Foundation programs.

**WOMEN IN ASIA**

Against a backdrop of globalization and rapidly growing economies, women in Asia have made remarkable progress in recent years. Improvements in exercising basic rights, strengthened legal systems, demographic transitions, and more dynamic civil societies have made this transformation possible. Despite these advances, enormous challenges to achieving gender equality remain.

Many women and girls across Asia still lack access to basic education, and even educated women often face significant obstacles in earning an income and having a voice in decisions that affect their lives. Discriminatory laws and harmful norms prevent women and girls from realizing their full potential, and gender inequality persists in areas such as inheritance and land rights, business regulations, political representation, access to healthcare, and the ability to live a life free from violence.

**AN INTEGRATED APPROACH**

The Asia Foundation is committed to gender equality and the promotion of women’s active participation in social, economic, and political life. In addition to supporting stand-alone efforts that address women’s and girls’ needs and experiences, our gender-integrated approach promotes gender equality through all of our work on governance, economic development, regional cooperation, and the environment across the Asia-Pacific region.

This allows us to:

- Improve understanding of the specific challenges facing women and girls and find solutions to overcome them;
- Address the distinct needs of women, men, girls, and boys through carefully targeted programs;
- Build consensus and cooperation among government officials, the private sector, civil society, religious leaders, and local communities to address key issues affecting women and girls;
- Generate pioneering pilot projects that utilize innovative approaches to accelerate women’s and girls’ progress that can be scaled up for sustainable impact.

**PROGRAM PRIORITIES**

The Asia Foundation’s work in women’s empowerment focuses on three key areas:

- Expanding women’s economic opportunities;
- Increasing women’s and girls’ rights and security;
RECENT EXAMPLES OF THE ASIA FOUNDATION’S WORK ON WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

AFGHANISTAN
To strengthen access to justice for women who have experienced violence in Afghanistan, The Asia Foundation has supported the training of formal and community-based justice sector workers on the Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women, and women’s rights within Islam. We are also strengthening community justice mechanisms and supporting awareness raising activities that target men, including traditional leaders.

NEPAL
In Nepal, women face distinct challenges in accessing the formal justice system. The Asia Foundation promotes community-based mediation as a means to improve access to justice and establish a culture of conflict resolution. We have worked with local partners to create more than 100 mediation service programs across 12 districts of Nepal that have provided more than 1,200 women with mediation support.

SRI LANKA, BANGLADESH, INDIA, AND NEPAL
Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are critical engines of economic growth and job creation, yet women own less than 10% of SMEs in South Asia. The Asia Foundation advances women’s ability to start and grow businesses and conduct trade in Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and India. Through study tours, regional networking events, public-private dialogues, information and communication technology, and direct capacity-building of women’s associations, the Foundation has strengthened a South Asian regional network of women entrepreneurs.

CHINA
One-third of the “new-generation” of migrant workers in China are women, many of whom aspire to become entrepreneurs, but face critical obstacles to starting and growing a business. To address these challenges, The Asia Foundation facilitates entrepreneurship training, access to credit, and mentoring opportunities for migrant workers so as to improve their socio-economic well-being, and enable them to both contribute to and benefit from economic development.

CAMBODIA
In Cambodia, unsafe labor migration practices increase the risk of exploitation and abuse, often in the form of labor and sex trafficking. To scale up prevention efforts, The Asia Foundation conducts trainings on safe migration and anti-trafficking strategies for community youth-based networks in high-risk provinces, and works to improve the capacity of local government to develop and implement policies that better protect communities from unsafe labor migration.

CAMBODIA, LAOS, MONGOLIA, MALAYSIA, AND VIETNAM
Women and girls are underrepresented in the fields of science and technology in Asia - areas with enormous growth potential. Since 2010, The Asia Foundation has partnered with the Merali Foundation to provide 500 young women from low-income families in Cambodia, Laos, Mongolia, Malaysia, and Vietnam with scholarships to pursue university degrees in science and technology.

INDIA
Youth across India, increasingly connected through social media platforms, are joining together to demand change and accountability to end gender-based violence. The Asia Foundation supported youth dialogues and consultations at 10 universities across the country to inform the students about the global movement to end violence against women, and to gather their recommendations for ending violence against women and girls and achieving gender equality.

TIMOR-LESTE
In Timor-Leste, where women represent less than 3 percent of xefe sukus (village chiefs), women’s voices and concerns often go unheard in decision-making processes. In response, the Foundation strengthens women’s leadership by providing gender equality training to xefe sukus and leadership training to female suku councils to increase the accountability and capacity of local government to address issues that are important to women.
EXPANDING WOMEN’S ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES: In many parts of Asia, women face discrimination that limits their education and economic options. Global research has demonstrated that investing in women is one of the most powerful ways to reduce poverty and accelerate development, while the UN estimates that the Asia-Pacific economy loses $89 billion annually as a result of women’s limited workforce participation. Our projects build on this knowledge through expanding economic opportunities for women.

Education: Women who lack education and skills can become trapped in cycles of illiteracy, poverty, and abuse. The Asia Foundation provides girls and women with the knowledge and skills they need to earn an income and lift themselves and their families out of poverty, including through scholarships to pursue secondary and tertiary education.

Entrepreneurship: Our projects identify and address specific constraints faced by women entrepreneurs and businesswomen. By providing women with a full range of tools including networking opportunities, mentoring, access to information and credit, and business management training, the Foundation fosters inclusive business environments wherein women can establish businesses and make their enterprises more profitable, and can better advocate for improved policies and business climates that directly address women’s interests.

Vocational Training: Market-driven vocational training can enable women to obtain better-paying jobs or start their own businesses. The Asia Foundation works alongside local partners to provide women with the skills to break into relatively higher-paid employment sectors traditionally dominated by men, such as motorcycle repair and taxi driving.

INCREASING WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND SECURITY: Gender-based violence and human trafficking are some of the most critical problems women face worldwide. These practices frequently result in debilitating trauma and exact a heavy toll on social and economic development across Asia.

Gender-Based Violence: The Asia Foundation works with individuals and communities to change negative attitudes and social norms that perpetuate gender-based violence and the exploitation of women and girls. We also engage government and civil society to strengthen laws, legal systems, and other response mechanisms to increase access to justice and improve service delivery for women and girls who experience violence.

Human Trafficking: As a leader in the fight against human trafficking for nearly two decades, The Asia Foundation has pioneered innovative initiatives to combat trafficking in nearly a dozen source, transit, and destination countries. The Foundation’s engagement across the Asia-Pacific region uniquely position us to respond with locally rooted, gender-sensitive, and durable strategies to challenge the quickly evolving dynamics of human trafficking within and across borders in Asia, and to enhance prevention, prosecution, and protection measures.

PROMOTING WOMEN’S FULL PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL AND PUBLIC LIFE: When women are unable to contribute to decisions that affect their lives, entire communities suffer. Women must play an active and effective role in public decision-making and have a voice on critical issues such as access to clean water and sanitation, healthcare, education, and business regulation.

Political Participation: The Asia Foundation helps women develop the skills they need to be informed voters, active members of political parties, and successful candidates. Our programs encourage women to engage in political processes and contribute to increased government transparency and accountability. We actively organize pre-election voter education campaigns to ensure that women know their voting rights and can cast informed, independent votes.

Legal Rights: The Asia Foundation advances women’s rights by working with governments and local partner organizations to support and strengthen legal systems. We equip women with information on their legal rights and access to free legal aid to enable them to claim those rights. In addition, the Foundation strengthens local efforts to reform laws and policies that discriminate against women, and leads community mediation programs to foster a culture of dispute resolution.