

## Making Gender a Priority in Asian-Led Development Cooperation

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Ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls and empowering them to be active participants in society are critical to achieving the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) by 2030. While [Goal 5](#) of the SDGs is a stand-alone goal focusing on women and girls, 11 of the 17 SDGs recognize achieving gender equality as a crucial part of the solution. Unlike the Millennium Development Goals, the SDGs have been embraced by countries from the north and south, traditional donors, and [South-South cooperation](#) (SSC) providers.



Ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls and empowering them to be active participants in society are critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Photo/Conor Ashleigh

From September 13-14, development experts, innovators, activists, and practitioners from governments, corporations, academia, NGOs, and multilateral organizations across Asia gathered in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, to discuss how Asian countries are accelerating opportunities for women and girls through their cooperation programs and where more can be done. This 17th meeting of the [Asian Approaches to Development Cooperation \(AADC\) dialogue](#) was jointly organized by The Asia Foundation, KDI School of Public Policy and Management, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Mongolian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. ([Read more](#) about the ongoing AADC dialogue.)

The gender lens juxtaposed two parallel trends about Asian-led SSC.

First, while government-led Asian development cooperation, which still comprises the bulk of SSC, endeavors to take a more people-centered approach to its cooperation, the big-ticket projects could be more gender-mindful. For example, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), like other Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors, has a gender policy that it mainstreams across its programs. China's President Xi Jinping has advocated for a "global environment favorable for women's development" and committed to a number of women-focused SSC projects and initiatives. Korea

introduced the 5-year \$200 million “Better Life for Girls” initiative under the Park presidency. Support for women’s entrepreneurship and skill development is a key component of India’s ongoing SSC in Afghanistan.

However, despite these commitments from governments, Asian development initiatives are not yet incorporating a serious gender-focused approach. China’s \$1 trillion Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which spans 60 countries, and the newly launched Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), led by India and Japan, will be transformative for growth and development. While these strategies promote connectivity and development across borders, they are noticeably gender-weak. The BRI vision document mentions women three times; the AAGC document has one mention. Dialogue participants expressed concern that lack of attention at the strategy level will translate to the same lack of attention during implementation.

Though meagre, this mention of women in the vision documents provides an invitation for stakeholders to open the space, expand the discussion, and create the opportunity for gender inclusive programs. One dialogue participant from India explained how the New Development Bank (also known as the BRICS bank) has invited civil society to provide input on its sustainability framework. While this framework does not currently recognize gender as one of the key pillars, the invitation creates the opportunity to change this. Another positive development is that the [China-Arab Women’s Forum](#) recently discussed women’s contribution to the Belt and Road Initiative.

Second, the dialogue revealed that outside of government-led SSC initiatives, which tend to be slower in recognizing and adopting gender issues, [Asian NGOs](#) and the [private sector](#) are actively promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment in their SSC. Dialogue participants presented innovative and transformative examples:

China’s textile and apparel industry through the China Textile Information Center (CTIC) is expanding its successful China-based Women Empowerment and Leadership Project in Chinese invested companies in five target countries: Pakistan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Cambodia. The project addresses women’s health, workplace legislation, cross-gender communications, and sexual harassment prevention, and works with company management to promote corporate commitment to gender equal practices and female- and family-friendly policies.

[SafetiPin](#), an Indian social enterprise has created a map-based online and mobile phone application that uses data to make cities more inclusive, safe, and free from violence for women and others. SafetiPin, with funding support from The Asia Foundation’s [Lotus Circle](#), collects and disseminates safety-related information through crowd sourcing. The data has been used to advocate local governments to improve public spaces for women. After a successful application in Delhi, SafetiPin has expanded into Bogota, Nairobi, Jakarta, and Quezon City.

The Asian Muslim Action Network, builds solidarity and action across women’s groups in conflict affected areas of Asia. AMAN Indonesia has been sharing lessons and experiences on the role Indonesian women played during Indonesia’s reformasi with women’s organization in Pattani, southern Thailand. In 2017, AMAN brought together women ulama from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Mindanao, and Southern Thailand to share strategies on combatting violent extremism and gender-based violence.

Singapore-based NGO, Chosun Exchange, runs a Women in Business program that helps bridge the gap in North Korean women’s limited access to business education, capital, and the socio-political relationships necessary to start and maintain a business. The program includes an exchange visit to Singapore to observe that country’s best practices in women’s business.

The South Asia Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Development Fund has supported HomeNet South Asia, a regional network of 59 home-based workers’ organizations from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, to establish SABAH, a project that builds supply chains, generates employment for women home-based workers, and collectively markets their products.

The Chinese Foundation for Poverty Alleviation, has been working in 18 countries outside China since 2005 with a priority on women and girls’ programming. CFPA’s Maternal and Infant Healthcare Program in Sudan, a collaboration with a Sudanese NGO, the Chinese Embassy in Sudan, a Chinese oil company,

and the Sudan government, used China's successful maternal and child health care model to establish a hospital, community-based health network, and package of essential services to address Sudan's high maternal and infant mortality rate.

These initiatives demonstrate how NGOs and enterprises across Asia are cooperating, sometimes with government support, sometimes through triangular cooperation arrangements, to advance women's empowerment. The innovative and progressive activities implemented by actors outside the state sector provide concrete opportunities and a wealth of experience for the large-scale government strategies to deliver on their commitment to people-centered development and connectivity. Dialogue participants noted the obvious but missing link. Organizations like the United Nations and The Asia Foundation have a role to play in enabling this connection and supporting non-state actors to expand their reach and influence to ensure that gender becomes a priority and not just a consideration in these transformational initiatives.

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