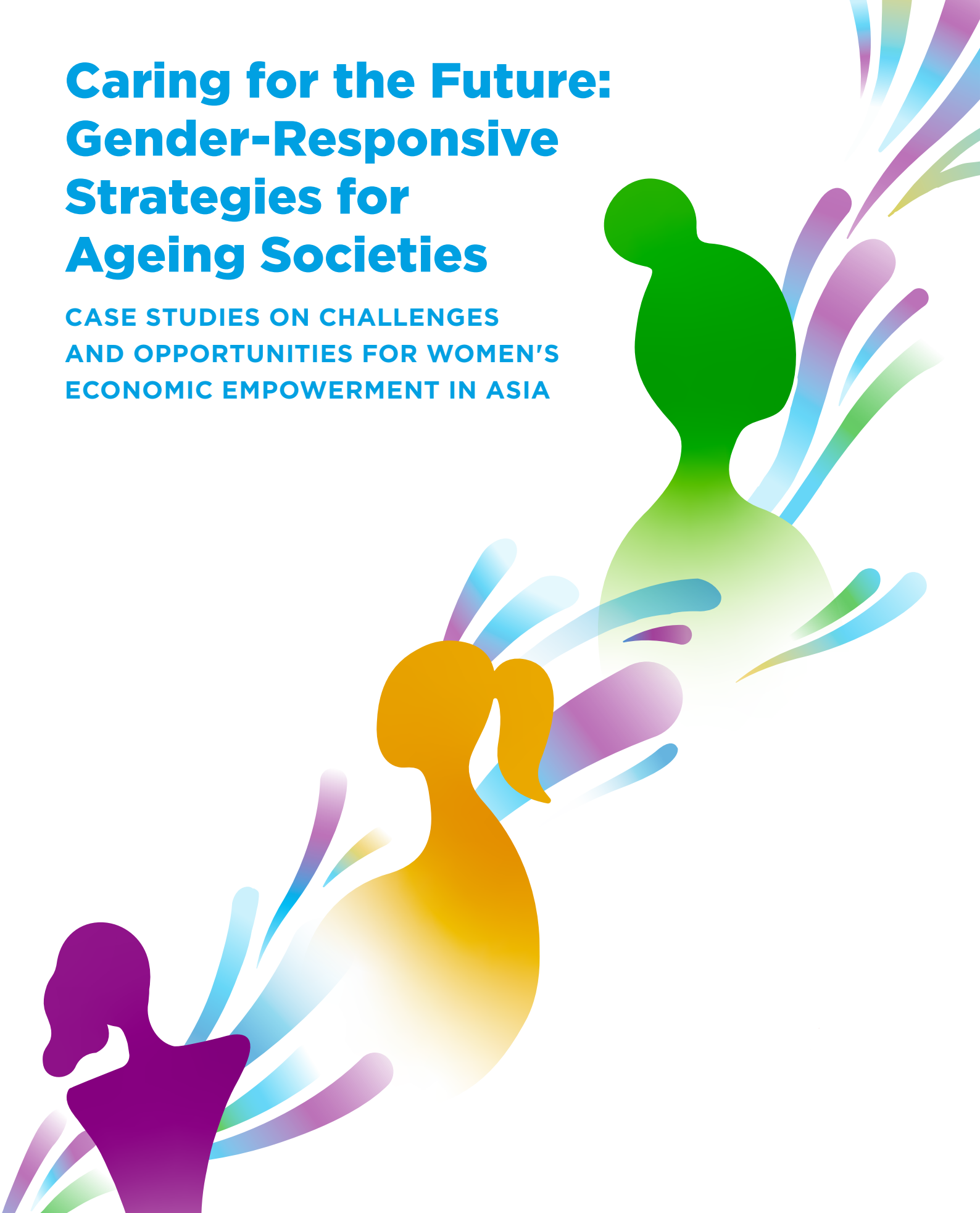


Caring for the Future: Gender-Responsive Strategies for Ageing Societies

CASE STUDIES ON CHALLENGES
AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN'S
ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN ASIA



With support from



Ministry of Gender Equality
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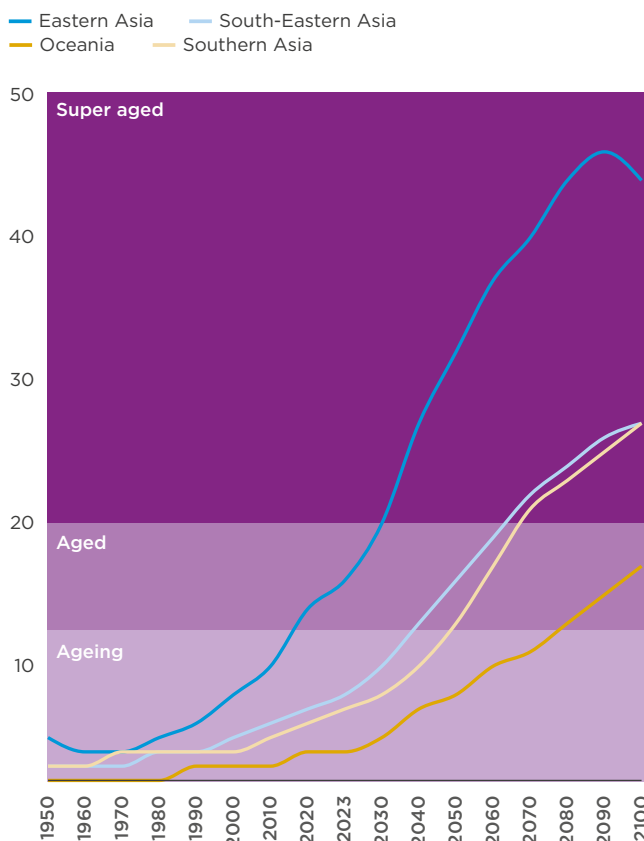
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The demographic transition in the Asia-Pacific region

Population ageing, associated with the demographic transition (Box 1), is both a global and regional trend that the Asia-Pacific region is experiencing at an unprecedented pace. Over recent decades, most countries in the region have progressed towards—or have already become—ageing societies, with the percentage of the population aged 65 years and older surpassing 7 per cent. While the onset and pace of this trend vary across countries, it has generally led to both the absolute and proportionate growth of the older population, a pattern that is expected to continue. In 2023, the Asia-Pacific region was home to 435.7 million people aged 65 years and older. By 2050, this number is projected to double, reaching 895.6 million.¹

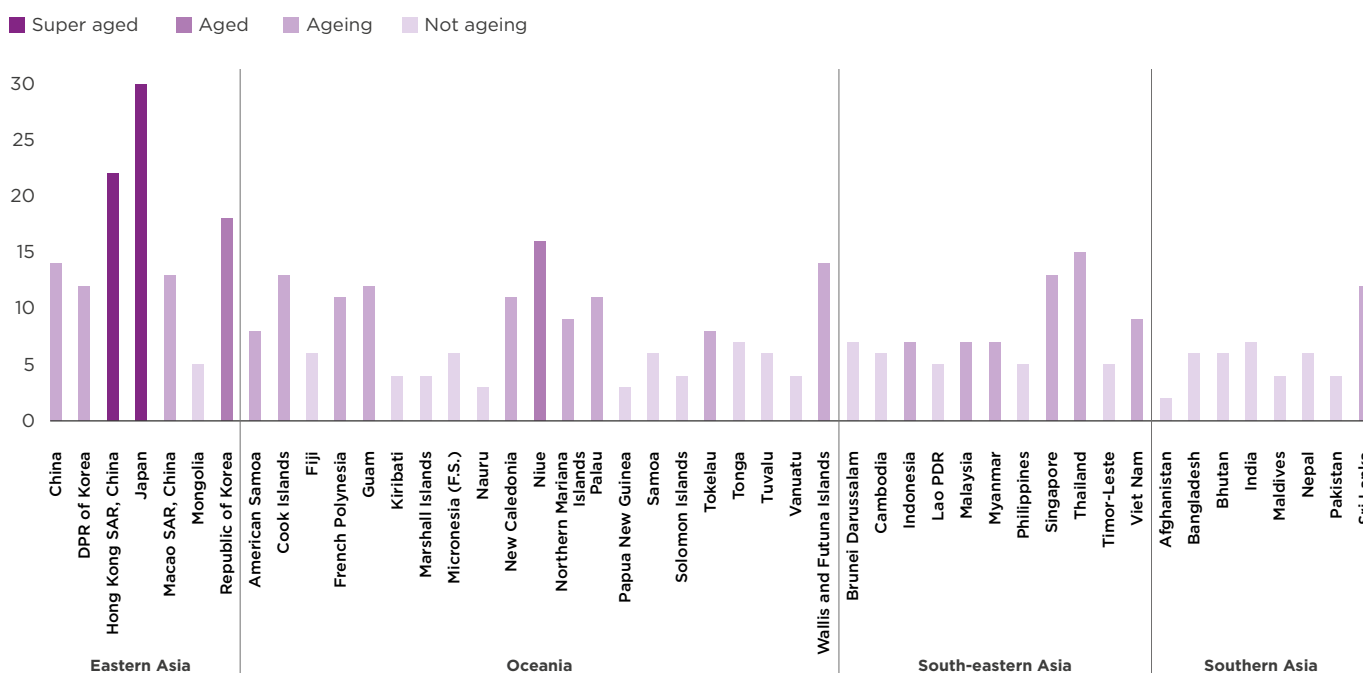
Most of the region’s older population currently resides in Eastern Asia, where Japan and the Republic of Korea have reached super-aged and aged status, respectively.² Similarly, South-Eastern Asia is experiencing population ageing, albeit at a slower rate, with countries such as Thailand and Singapore already classified as aged societies. In contrast, Oceania and Southern Asia remain in the earlier stages of the demographic transition. By 2100, people aged 65 years and older are projected to represent 44 per cent of Eastern Asia’s population (which will continue to host the largest share of the region’s older population), 17 per cent of Oceania’s, 27 per cent of South-Eastern Asia’s, and 27 per cent of Southern Asia’s (Figures 1 and 2).

FIGURE 1.
Estimated and Projected Old-Age (65 Years and Above) Population Share, by Subregions, 1950–2100 (Percentage)



Source: UN DESA, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2024.

FIGURE 2.
Old-Age (65 Years and Above) Population Share, by Sex, 2023 (Percentage)



Source: UN DESA, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2024.

BOX 1.

What is the Demographic Transition and How Does It Work?

The demographic transition refers to the shift from high fertility and mortality rates to lower levels of both, resulting in a larger and eventually older population as societies progress from one demographic regime to another.³ It typically unfolds in five stages (Figure 3). In the pre-transition stage, population size remains relatively stable, as high birth rates are offset by equally high death rates. At the onset of the demographic transition, in the early transition stage, mortality rates decline, especially among infants and children, while fertility rates remain high. As a result, the population grows due to declining mortality at younger ages, leading to an expanding share of children and youth and raising consumption needs and child dependency ratios.⁴

In the intermediate stage, fertility rates begin to decline while mortality rates continue to fall. As the proportion of younger people decreases without an immediate counterbalancing rise in the older population, the working-age population temporarily grows relative to dependants (i.e. children and older persons). This creates conditions for the so-called *demographic dividend*—the economic growth potential driven by a larger working-age population relative to dependants. The dividend is typically realized through a larger labour supply, higher savings rates, and greater investments in human capital.⁵ With fewer dependants to support at both the societal and household levels, more resources become available for growth-enhancing investments. A larger workforce can also boost tax revenues, while a lower share of dependants can reduce social security expenditures, allowing governments greater flexibility to invest in inclusive development.⁶

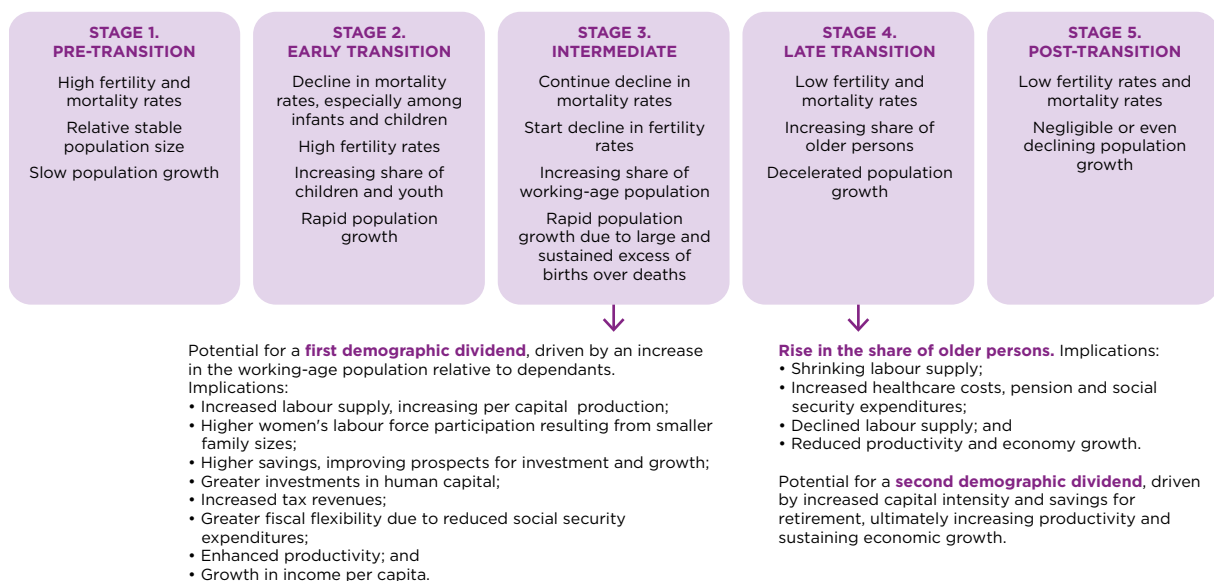
However, unlocking the full potential of the demographic dividend requires a supportive policy environment. Measures such as access to affordable and quality care services—including family-friendly workplaces—are crucial to ensuring gender-equal economic participation rates and gains. Flexible labour markets and macroeconomic policies that encourage investment are essential to absorb a growing workforce. Access to effective savings mechanisms and confidence in financial markets encourage individuals to save, while investments in education and health ensure a skilled and productive labour force. By fostering an enabling environment, policies can maximize the benefits of the demographic dividend, leading to higher productivity levels, improved living standards and increased per capita income.⁷

As the transition progresses into the late transition stage, falling fertility rates lead to slower population growth and, eventually, an increase in the proportion of older people. As a result, labour supply growth slows, and challenges such as shrinking workforces, rising dependency ratios and mounting pressures on social protection systems begin to emerge. A declining labour force coupled with increasing dependency ratios places downward pressure on productivity, aggregate savings and economic growth. The fiscal implications are significant, as rising healthcare costs, pension expenditures, and care demands strain public resources.⁸

However, within this context, a second demographic dividend may occur by leveraging the increased capital intensity of the economy and the savings of working-age individuals for retirement. Higher savings among older working-age individuals can support greater investment in human and physical capital, increased productivity and sustained economic growth.⁹ Increasing the ratio of capital to labour makes labour more productive—a process known as ‘capital deepening’, which drives the second dividend. This period persists as long as savings generated in the economy are productively invested in human, physical and environmental capital.¹⁰ In this scenario, most people survive to old age, and each successive generation remains similar in size to the previous one. Once the demographic transition is complete, in the post-transition stage, population growth may stabilize near zero, cease entirely, or begin to decline if fertility rates drop to very low levels.¹¹

FIGURE 3.

The Broad Stages of the Demographic Transition



Gender implications of the demographic transition for women's economic empowerment

The demographic transition occurs in distinct stages, each presenting unique gendered implications for women's economic empowerment. During the pre-transition stage, economic opportunities for women are typically limited, as unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities dominate their daily activities. This situation constrains their financial independence and reinforces traditional gender roles. In the early transition, an increase in the working-age population creates economic opportunities; however, women often remain underrepresented in the formal economy due to caregiving responsibilities. Even when a larger working-age population relative to dependents boosts economic productivity, gender gaps in employment and wages frequently persist. Many women find themselves in informal or low-paid positions, largely due to the lack of affordable childcare and family-friendly workplaces. As the population ages, women—who tend to live longer than men—constitute most of the old-age population, yet they face greater risks of poverty due to lower lifetime earnings and limited pension coverage, which heightens their economic vulnerability. Responsibilities shift from childcare to old-age care, disproportionately affecting women, who often provide unpaid care for ageing parents, spouses, and community members. In the final phase of the transition, the demand for care services intensifies, as older women serve as both primary caregivers and care recipients.

Note: This stylized description of the demographic transition refers to a population closed to migration, where population trends are determined entirely by changes in fertility and mortality levels.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Bloom, David E.; Canning, David; Sevilla, Jaypee (2003). [The Demographic Dividend: A New Perspective on the Economic Consequences of Population Change](#); Korwatanasakul, U., Sirivunnabood, P., and Majoe, A. (2021). [Demographic transition and its impacts on fiscal sustainability in East and Southeast Asia](#), ADBI Working Papers 1220, Asian Development Bank Institute; UN DESA (2021). [Global population growth and sustainable development](#); UN DESA (2023). [Leaving No One Behind In An Ageing World. World Social Report 2023](#).

Changes in the dependency ratio—a demographic indicator reflecting the ratio of care dependants (children and older people) relative to the working-age population (15 to 64 years)—serve as a critical metric of population ageing. The old-age dependency ratio, which measures the number of older persons relative to the working-age population, has steadily increased since 1950. By 2050, Eastern Asia is projected to have the highest old-age dependency ratio in the Asia-Pacific region, with 54 older persons for every 100 people of working age.¹²

Two primary factors drive population ageing: declining fertility rates and increasing life expectancy.¹³ Over the past seven decades, fertility rates in the region have dropped significantly, with the sharpest decline observed in Eastern Asia, where fertility fell from 5.5 children per woman in 1950 to one child per woman in 2023.¹⁴ While the pace of this shift varies among countries, the transition to below-replacement fertility (2.1 children per woman) has become a defining characteristic across the Asia-Pacific region. By 2023, 22 out of the 47 countries with available data reported total fertility rates below replacement level.¹⁵

Advancements in healthcare access, improved nutrition, and better living standards have markedly contributed to increased life expectancy throughout the region.¹⁶ In 1950, life expectancy at birth was 43 years in Eastern Asia, Oceania, and South-Eastern Asia, while it was 40 years in Southern Asia. By 2023, this figure had risen to 79 years in Eastern Asia, 68 years in Oceania, and 72 years in both South-Eastern Asia and Southern Asia.¹⁷

Declining fertility rates combined with increasing life expectancy present new challenges for gender equality and women's economic empowerment. On average, women have a longer life expectancy than men. In 2023, women outlived men by six years in Eastern Asia and South-Eastern Asia, five years in Oceania, and three years in Southern Asia.¹⁸ That same year, women already made up 55 per cent of the older population in the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁹

As populations age, the ratio of retirees to workers will continue to increase, particularly among women. This trend indicates a growing demand for care services for older persons, with a disproportionately higher share of older women requiring care and support.²⁰ Moreover, women's longer life expectancy often results in higher rates of widowhood, leaving them at greater risk of poverty, poor health, and social isolation.²¹

Population ageing also has specific gendered implications for economic insecurity and financial hardship. While women tend to live longer than men, they experience higher rates of illness, limited employment opportunities and reduced access to and control over productive resources. Gender disparities accumulated throughout the life cycle drive unequal ageing. Lower lifetime earnings and limited labour force participation lead to lower savings and pension accumulation. As a result, women often enter old age with the cumulative effects of lifelong gender discrimination.²²

Rising costs for healthcare, long-term care, retirement and other forms of support for older persons, combined with potential reductions in government revenue due to fewer taxpayers of working age, could exert considerable pressure on public finances, social security systems, and public health infrastructures, often placing women at a further disadvantage.²³

If left unaddressed, the demographic transition may undermine gains in gender equality and exacerbate poverty among women and girls.

While demographic transition may further intensify gender disparities, it also presents new opportunities. As women constitute a large share of paid care workers, including domestic workers, transforming care systems is critical not only for ensuring the sustainability and inclusivity of ageing societies but also for dismantling structural barriers, such as unpaid care gaps, that lead to gender segregation in the labour market. Addressing these challenges and opportunities requires equitable and effective strategies that leave no one behind.

Transforming care systems has the potential to address the growing care demands of ageing societies while simultaneously unlocking economic opportunities for women and promoting the economic rights of both current and future generations. Gender-responsive actions that ensure quality care services are affordable and accessible for all are essential for providing equal opportunities for women in the economy. These measures will be critical in addressing the evolving needs of ageing societies and economies. They can help alleviate women's economic insecurities in old age and eliminate gender discrimination throughout their life cycle. Additionally, they contribute to the development of more family-friendly economies, where care responsibilities are shared, and women's equal participation is not hindered by disproportionate unpaid care work.

Objectives, geographical scope and structure

This brief aims to assist governments, policymakers, multilateral organizations, the private sector and civil society in fostering consensus around a gender-responsive agenda in response to the demographic transition in the Asia-Pacific region. Addressing demographic shifts through a women's economic empowerment lens requires policies that not only mitigate the socioeconomic challenges associated with ageing populations but also create opportunities while dismantling the structural barriers

that limit women's economic participation, which in turn contributes to more inclusive economies.

By analysing the barriers women and girls face in economic participation, this policy brief underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to demographic transition that addresses intersecting inequalities throughout their life cycle. Evidence-informed policymaking, agenda-setting, and programming that tackle systemic challenges in women's economic empowerment within the context of demographic change have the transformative potential to advance progress towards all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At the same time, they can capitalize on opportunities arising from demographic trends to create a more inclusive, equitable and sustainable future for all.

This brief examines the socioeconomic implications of population ageing and highlights the necessity of integrating gender mainstreaming into policy responses. A gender analysis was conducted by reviewing current policy approaches in four countries—China, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Thailand—selected due to their distinct yet comparable experiences with rapid population ageing.

Across the Asia-Pacific region, these four countries are undergoing significant transformations in their population structures. Rapid declines in fertility rates and rising life expectancy have accelerated demographic transitions. Fertility rates in all four countries have fallen below replacement levels (Figure 4), driven by industrialization, increased female labour force participation, and evolving social norms. At the same time, advancements in healthcare and technology have significantly increased life expectancy, which rose by at least four years in each of these countries between 2000 and 2023 (Figure 5). Women, on average, continue to outlive men, further intensifying the gendered implications of population ageing.

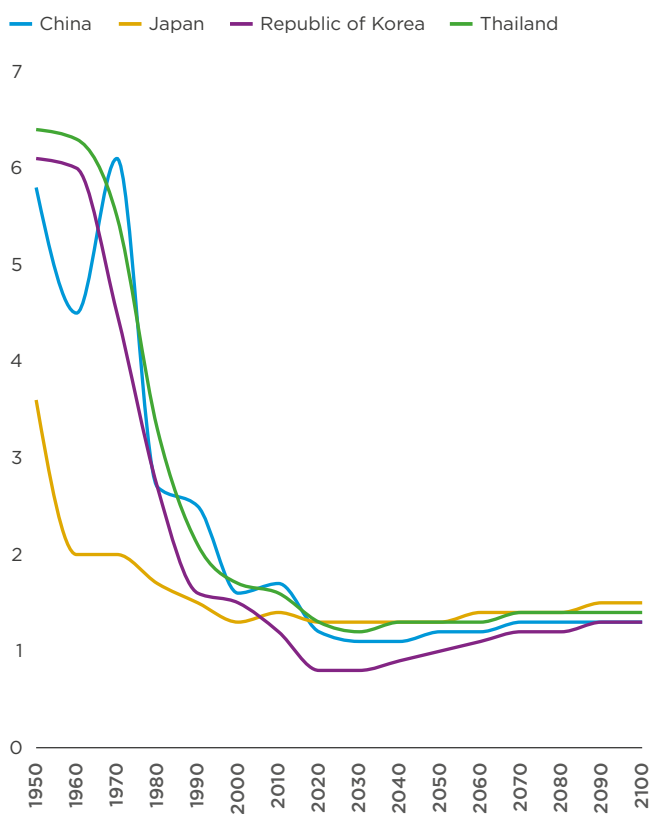
As a result of demographic transition, these countries are contending with growing elderly populations and shrinking working-age cohorts (Figure 6). Between 1990 and 2024, the proportion of people aged 65 and older has more than doubled in all four countries, reaching some of the highest levels in the Asia-Pacific region. In China, the Republic of Korea and Thailand, this demographic is projected to double again by 2050, underscoring the accelerating pace of population ageing. As of 2024, Japan is classified as a super-aged society, with 30 per cent of its population aged 65 and older—the highest proportion in the region. China, the Republic of Korea and Thailand, where older persons make up 15, 18, and 15 per cent of their populations, respectively, are classified as aged societies. Meanwhile,

working-age populations are contracting, with projected declines from 2024 to 2050 of 10 per cent in China, 8 per cent in Japan, 18 per cent in the Republic of Korea and 11 per cent in Thailand.

These demographic shifts are elevating old-age dependency ratios, particularly for women (Figure 7), and increasing pressure on the workforce and social protection systems. As the population ages, so too does the labour force (Figure 8). Over the past 30 years, labour force participation rates (LFPR) among those aged 55 to 64 have risen significantly, particularly among women. Between

1990 and 2023, Japan saw a 24-percentage-point increase in LFPR for women in this age group, compared to an 8-percentage-point increase for men. Similarly, in the Republic of Korea, LFPR for women aged 55 to 64 rose by 13 percentage points, while men in the same age group saw a 5-percentage-point increase. These trends highlight the growing economic contribution of older women and underscore the need for policies that support women’s workforce participation, ensure decent work opportunities and address caregiving responsibilities.

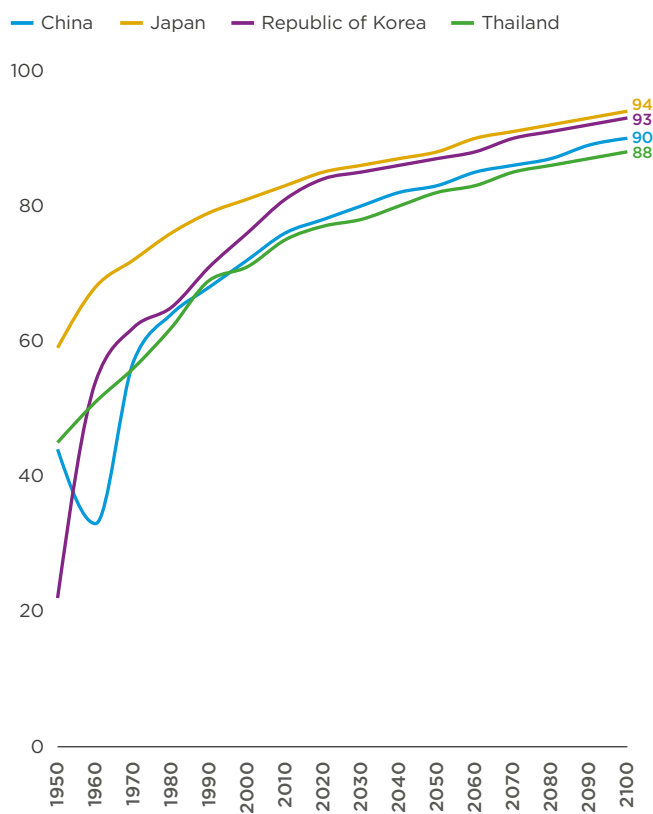
FIGURE 4.
Total Fertility Rate, 1950–2100 (Live Births Per Woman)



Note: The graphs depict estimates and the medium scenario projection. For further information, see [Definition of Projection Scenarios](#).

Source: UN DESA, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2024.

FIGURE 5.
Life Expectancy at Birth, 1950–2100 (years)

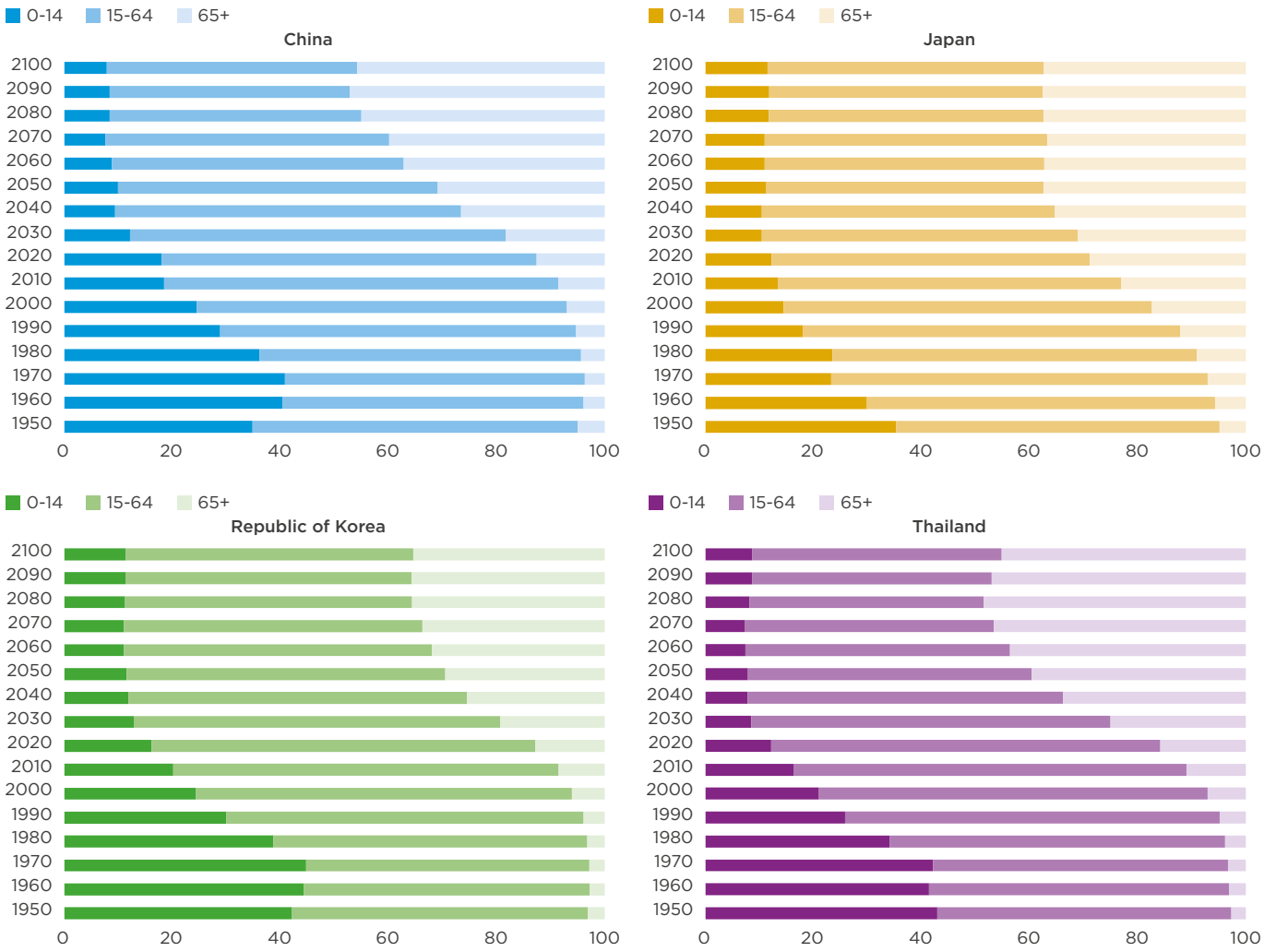


Note: The graph depicts estimates and the medium scenario projection. For further information, see [Definition of Projection Scenarios](#).

Source: UN DESA, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2024.

FIGURE 6.

Estimated and Projected Population Share, by Age Groups, 1950–2100 (Percentage)

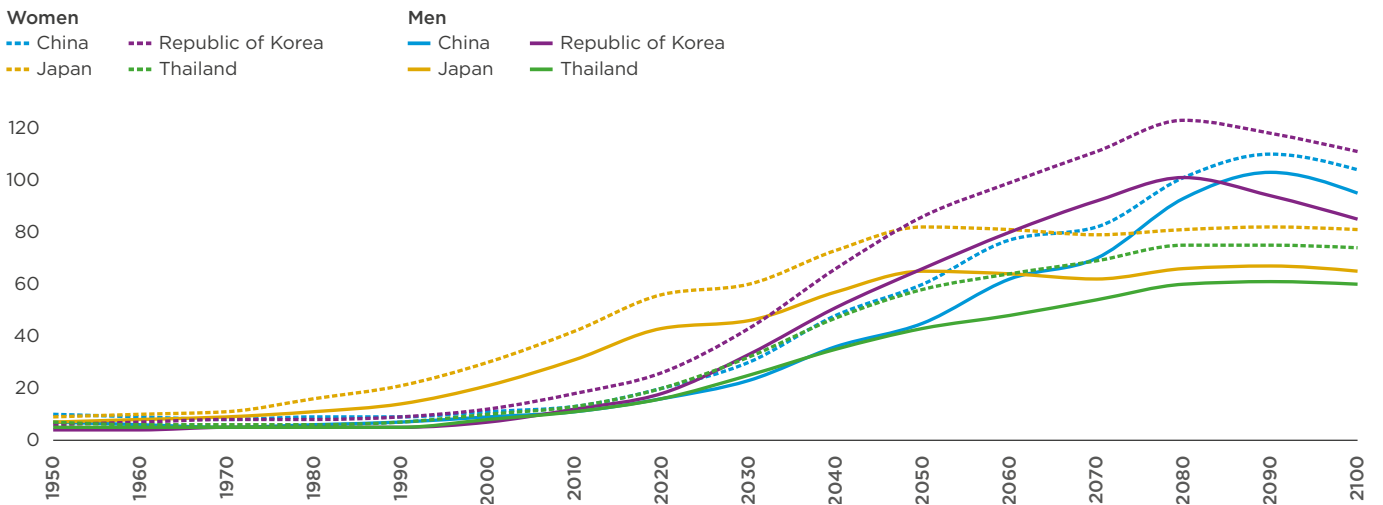


Note: The graphs depict estimates and the medium scenario projection. For further information, see [Definition of Projection Scenarios](#).

Source: UN DESA, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2024.

FIGURE 7.

Old-Age Dependency Ratio, by Sex, 1950–2100

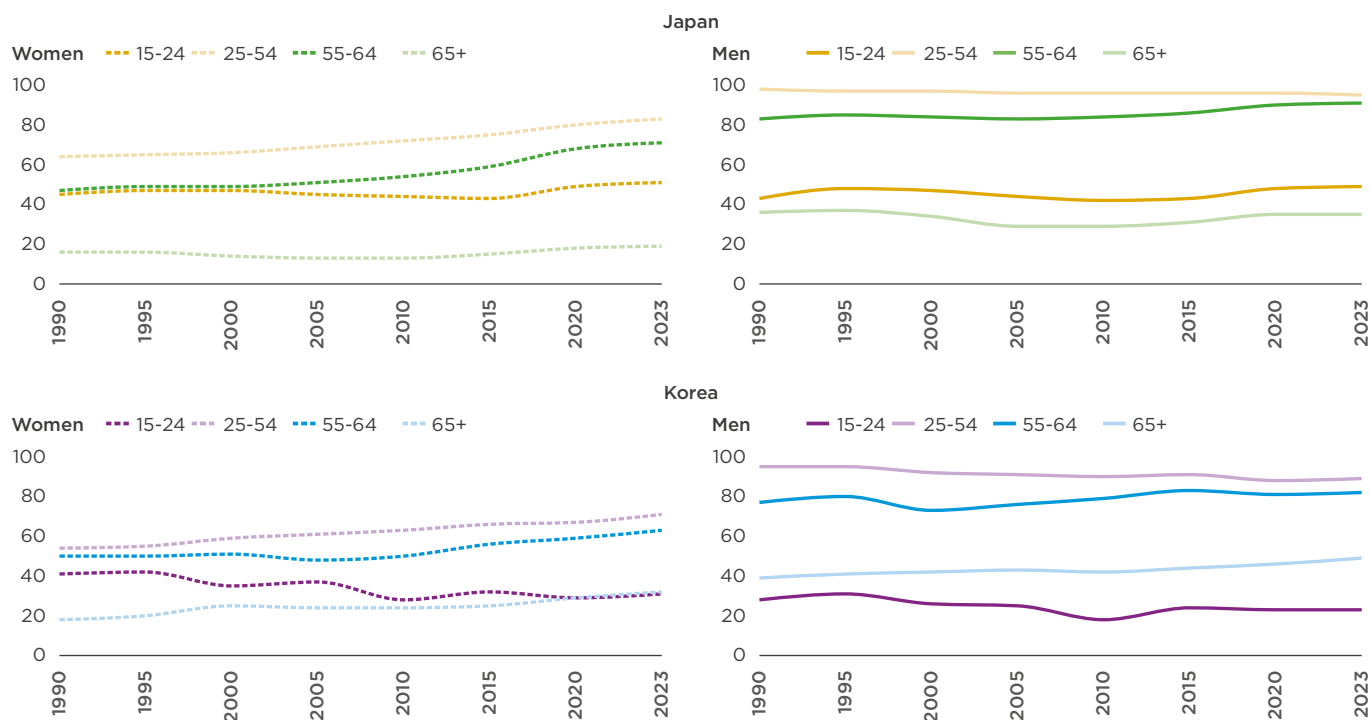


Note: The graph depicts estimates and the medium scenario projection. For further information, see [Definition of Projection Scenarios](#).

Source: UN DESA, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2024.

FIGURE 8.

Labour Force Participation Rate, by Sex and Age, 1990–2023 (Percentage)



Source: ILOSTAT.

The economic and social implications of ageing populations

The demographic transition has significant economic and social implications.²⁴ As populations age, spending patterns shift. Older consumers typically purchase fewer durable goods, such as cars and furniture, while increasing their spending on services, particularly healthcare. Since services are generally less capital-intensive, overall economic spending may grow more slowly, reducing investment and potentially slowing economic growth.²⁵ At the same time, in most societies, older persons consume more than they produce, whereas the working-age population typically generates labour income that exceeds consumption expenditures.²⁶ Consequently, changes in population age structures can disrupt the balance between producers and consumers, leading to substantial economic and social consequences.²⁷ Households (through inter-generational support), markets (through savings and investments) and governments (through healthcare, pensions, and social protection systems) play crucial roles in balancing consumption across the life cycle by redistributing resources among different age groups.²⁸

The changing size and composition of the working-age population and labour force are critical factors in determining the impact of ageing populations on productivity. As a country undergoes demographic transition, the

proportion of the working-age population first increases and then declines, while the share of the older population rises (Box 1). A shrinking working-age population increases the old-age dependency ratio, potentially slowing economic growth and reducing competitiveness. To sustain or improve living standards, a society depends on its working-age population to generate sufficient output to meet demand while also funding public and private transfers to children and older persons and saving for retirement.²⁹ At the same time, population ageing results in a smaller and older labour force. As the median age of the labour force increases, average productivity tends to decline.³⁰ Ultimately, output will decrease if the number of workers in the labour force declines without a corresponding increase in productivity, and per capita output will fall as the workforce ages and becomes less productive.³¹

As economies age, fiscal imbalances may arise due to declining tax revenues and potential increases in government expenditures. A growing ageing population places pressure on public finances through higher costs in healthcare, long-term care and pension schemes. Simultaneously, a shrinking working-age population and reduced productivity adversely affect government tax revenues, as fewer workers are available to support an increasing number of older dependants. Women, both as caregivers and care recipients, bear a disproportionate share of this demand.³²

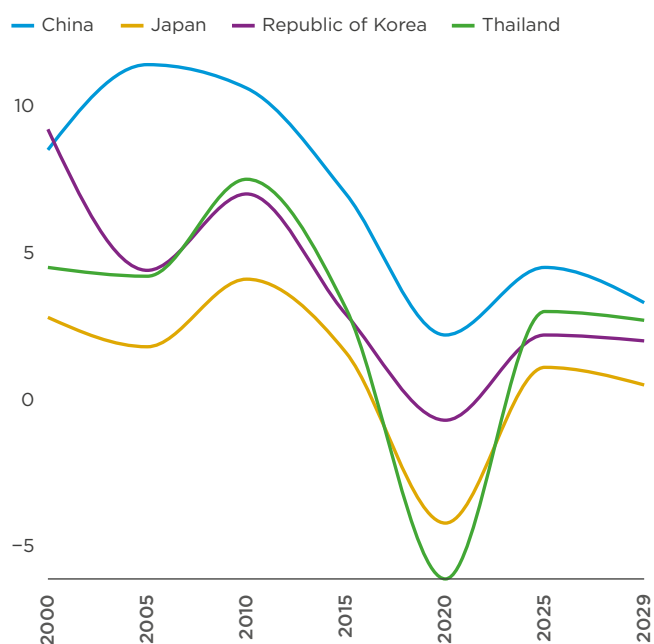
Population ageing poses a major challenge to the sustainability of social protection and pension systems. A shrinking number of labour force entrants, combined with increased longevity, strains contributory pension systems.³³ Women are disproportionately affected due to lower participation in the formal economy, the gender pay gap and more frequent career interruptions due to family responsibilities. These factors collectively reduce their pension contributions and result in lower earnings-related pensions.³⁴

Navigating demographic shifts: Policy responses

To mitigate the negative impacts of population ageing and counter the projected decline in real GDP growth (Figure 9), China, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Thailand have started to implement various policy measures to address the socioeconomic challenges of demographic shifts. These responses can be grouped into four key categories:

- i. Policy measures aimed at increasing the size of the workforce;
- ii. Policy measures aimed at increasing birth rates directly;
- iii. Policy measures aimed at enhancing family-friendly workplaces; and
- iv. Policy measures addressing long-term care and ageing populations.

FIGURE 9.
Real GDP Growth, 2000–2029 (Annual Percentage Change)



Source: International Monetary Fund.

(i) Increasing the size of the workforce

To counteract the economic consequences of a declining working-age population, countries are gradually increasing retirement ages to enhance the financial sustainability of pension systems and encourage greater labour force participation among older persons.³⁵

In 2024, China approved a plan to incrementally raise the standard pensionable age, beginning in 2025. The reform also introduces the option of deferred retirement, providing flexibility for older workers.³⁶ Similarly, Thailand plans to raise the retirement age to 65 for both the private and government sectors, reflecting advancements in health and medical technology that have contributed to longer life expectancy.³⁷

In Japan, the Law Concerning Stabilization of Employment of Older Persons, originally enacted in 1971, has undergone several revisions. The 1986 amendment set a mandatory retirement age of 60, while the 2004 revision required employers to retain workers until age 65. The most recent amendment, in 2020, mandates that both public and private sector employers make efforts to ensure employment until age 70. Employers can meet this requirement through various measures, including:

- a. Raising the retirement age to 70;
- b. Abolishing mandatory retirement ages;
- c. Implementing re-employment and service extension systems to secure continuous employment until age 70;
- d. Establishing outsourcing contracts until age 70; or
- e. Engaging employees in nonprofit and volunteer associations or social contribution projects, either within the company or through third-party initiatives.³⁸

Among all OECD countries, the Republic of Korea faces the largest projected decline in its working-age population between 2020 and 2060, posing challenges to the labour market, economic growth and pension system sustainability. To address these issues, the National Pension Scheme has been gradually increasing the retirement age by one year every five years since 2013. This plan is set to raise the retirement age from the current 62 to 65 by 2033, mitigating the impacts of an ageing population and ensuring long-term pension system sustainability.³⁹

Several countries in the region are also implementing measures to enhance the financial security of older individuals by introducing policies that complement existing pension systems and promote financial independence in later years. In 2022, China launched a third-pillar private pension programme to supplement the country's social insurance and mandatory individual account systems.

This initiative encourages voluntary retirement savings by allowing individuals covered by the social insurance system to contribute up to 12,000 yuan (CNY) (approximately US\$1,680) annually into tax-advantaged personal pension accounts. Withdrawals may be made as a lump sum or in monthly instalments upon reaching the pensionable age or in cases of disability or emigration.⁴⁰

In 2023, Thailand introduced a poverty-targeting mechanism for its old-age allowance programme. Previously available to all citizens aged 60 or older who were not receiving a public-sector pension, the benefit now targets individuals with household incomes below a predetermined threshold. However, the income test does not apply to those who were already receiving the allowance before the reform.⁴¹

Several countries in the Asia-Pacific region have expanded pension coverage to vulnerable groups of workers, including part-time and self-employed individuals, non-citizen workers, and those engaged in new forms of employment. In 2024, under the Employees' Health Insurance System and Employees' Pension Insurance System, Japan implemented a reform to extend pension and health insurance coverage to certain part-time workers. Employers are now required to enroll part-time employees working at least 20 hours per week and earning at least 88,000 Japanese yen (JPY) (approximately US\$610) per month. This reform broadens coverage requirements to employers with more than 50 employees, thereby improving financial protection for a larger group of workers.⁴²

Additionally, several countries are working to ensure that older individuals have access to services and technologies that promote their health and well-being, enabling them to remain active and engaged in society. The Republic of Korea has established an Age-Friendly Industry Support Centre to support research and development in age-friendly technologies and provide consultations on diversification and quality enhancements for age-friendly products. The Centre also ranks and classifies outstanding products and provides financial assistance to businesses developing products designed for older individuals. Additionally, it offers digital literacy classes facilitated by the metropolitan government to help older persons engage with technology.⁴³

(ii) Increasing birth rates

Although research shows that reversing long-term fertility decline (and ultimately population decline) would require unprecedented and unrealistic increases in fertility sustained over decades, countries have recently introduced pronatalist measures in response to rapidly declining fertility rates.⁴⁴

China has progressively relaxed its one-child policy, culminating in the adoption of the three-child policy in 2021 to raise fertility levels and maintain population growth with a more balanced age structure. In the same year, the amended Population and Family Planning Law was passed to support couples in having more children.⁴⁵ According to the National Bureau of Statistics' national population sample survey, the total number of births in China in 2024 reached 9.54 million, an increase of 520,000 compared to 2023. This marks the first rise since 2017, primarily driven by accumulated childbearing intentions in recent years, the gradual implementation of childbearing support policies across various regions and cultural preferences for births in the Year of the Dragon.⁴⁶

In alignment with the Measures to Reverse the Declining Fertility Rate, the Republic of Korea announced a series of housing support measures on 19 June 2024. These measures aim to provide greater assistance to newlywed households, families with recent childbirths and those with multiple children. The measures include relaxed public housing requirements, the removal of income criteria for newborn loans and expanded tax credits for families with children.⁴⁷

Thailand's 2024 5x5 Let's Turn the Tide policy addresses demographic shifts through five pillars. Key initiatives focus on strengthening family support and educational institutions, prioritizing comprehensive healthcare for mothers and children, expanding accessible early childhood centres near communities, promoting life and vocational skills development and leveraging technology for advanced learning environments (Pillar 2 on children and youth).

The 2024 National Agenda for Fertility Promotion with High-Quality Care for Human Capital Development aims to achieve a fertility rate of 1.5 live births per woman by 2042 by fostering an enabling environment through measures such as extending maternity and paternity leave and providing childcare subsidies. It also seeks to shift social norms regarding gender roles and offer high-quality care, including infertility treatment, child growth and development support and counselling for unintended pregnancies.⁴⁸

(iii) Enhancing family-friendly economies

Countries are also indirectly addressing low fertility through family-friendly policies that support parents in balancing work and family life.⁴⁹ Japan has expanded childcare facilities to address long waiting lists and the "one-year-old barrier," successfully reducing the number of children on waiting lists to fewer than 3,000 in urban areas. In 2023,

the Children and Family Agency was established to centralize childcare and family policies, encompassing early childhood education and care services as well as measures to combat declining fertility rates, child abuse, child poverty and maternal and child healthcare.

Key initiatives include expanded childcare leave benefits, child allowances and free university education for families with three or more children. For example, parents who both take at least 14 days of childcare leave receive an additional 13 per cent in benefit payments for up to 28 days. The child allowance for a third child and beyond has been increased to \$200 per month, the household income limit has been removed, and children up to 18 years old are now eligible to receive this allowance. Furthermore, in 2024, the Basic Policy on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women was introduced to promote work-life balance and support workers in managing long-term care responsibilities for older or ill relatives. The policy includes measures to encourage flexible working arrangements, improve transparency on male childcare leave uptake, and provide subsidies to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that support employees on childcare or caregiver leave. Additionally, it advocates for creating work environments that accommodate individual needs, such as reducing long working hours and offering optional four-day workweeks.⁵⁰

In China, policy measures include incentives such as tax reductions, childcare subsidies, and expanded maternity and paternity leave options. The government is also investing in childcare infrastructure and exploring ways

to enhance support for families with multiple children. As part of these efforts, 23 provinces are piloting maternity subsidies for families with two or more children.⁵¹ In October 2024, the State Council released “Several Measures to Accelerate the Improvement of the Childbirth Support Policy System and Promote the Establishment of a Childbirth-Friendly Society.” Among these 13 measures, the emphasis on strengthening employee rights and fostering a family-friendly working environment explicitly calls for improving policies that promote women’s employment.

The Republic of Korea is implementing family-friendly policies that emphasize work-family balance and accessible childcare. Initiatives include increasing parental leave pay caps, providing flexible leave options and expanding funding for temporary replacements in SMEs (Box2). To improve access to childcare, the government seeks to ensure high-quality care for all children aged 0–11 by introducing free early childhood education, improving teacher-to-child ratios and expanding after-school programmes to assist working parents. Under the 4th Basic Plan for Low Fertility and Ageing Society (2021–2025), plans are also in place to diversify childcare options by expanding time-based and home-based childcare during non-standard hours and vacations as well as increasing the availability of employer-supported childcare services in workplaces.⁵²

Overall, these policies may help individuals achieve their desired family size while also contributing to financial independence in later years, particularly for women.⁵³

BOX 2.

Case Study: Seoul City’s Small and Medium Enterprises Work-Life Balance Point System

In 2024, the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) launched the SME Work-Life Balance Point System to address the Republic of Korea’s low fertility rate, with Seoul’s birth rate reaching a record low of 0.55 in 2023. The initiative aims to improve work-life balance support in SMEs and encourage the use of existing work-life balance policies. The System awards points to participating SMEs based on three main criteria:

- i. Policies fostering an enabling environment for work-life balance;
- ii. Use of existing parental, maternal and family care leave policies or the employment of temporary replacements or additional employees during such leaves; and
- iii. Other policies, including flexible working hours, support for employees getting married, taking medical leave or engaging in other life events.

Based on accumulated points, SMEs are eligible for a range of incentives, including subsidies for temporary replacements, salary subsidies for paid maternal leave, additional points in SMG provincial project biddings, and deferred tax audits by the SMG. As of the latest application phase, 289 SMEs across sectors, such as information technology, professional services and manufacturing, have joined the programme.⁵⁴

(iv) Addressing long-term care and ageing

As populations age and the demand for care increases, long-term care is becoming a key policy priority, particularly as the need for professional care services rises alongside shortages of care workers in many countries.

Japan and the Republic of Korea have established formal, compulsory long-term care insurance schemes funded through a combination of contributions and state subsidies.⁵⁵ In Japan, the Long-Term Care Insurance (LTCI) system, introduced in 2000, was designed to address the needs of an ageing society. The LTCI covers home-based, community-based and institutional care, with home-based care being the most utilized option, a trend that has continued to rise since the system's inception. The private sector provides more than half of home-based and community-based care and over 60 per cent of institutional care. In response to increasing care demands and workforce shortages, Japan has expanded the recruitment of migrant care workers through various labour migration schemes, starting in 2017.

This initiative has significantly increased the number of migrant care workers under the Technical Intern Training and Specified Skilled Worker statuses. According to the 9th Nursing Care Insurance Business Plan, prefectures estimate that approximately 2.4 million nursing care staff will be required by 2026, an increase of 250,000 (63,000 per year), and approximately 2.72 million by 2040, an increase of 570,000 (32,000 per year).

To meet this target, the government is implementing comprehensive measures to secure nursing care personnel, including:

1. Improving the working conditions of nursing care staff;
2. Securing and developing diverse human resources; Minimizing staff turnover;
3. Promoting staff retention and enhancing productivity;
4. Making nursing care work more attractive; and
5. Creating an environment conducive to accepting foreign personnel.⁵⁶

In 2008, the Republic of Korea launched its LTCI scheme to address the challenges of a rapidly ageing population, creating a new framework for the provision and utilization of medical and social care for older persons.⁵⁷ Despite implementing the LTCI and introducing the Basic Pension in 2014, the Republic of Korea continues to grapple with fragmented care systems and limited economic engagement opportunities for older adults.

In response, the government has introduced the 4th Basic Plan for Low Fertility and Ageing Society (2021–2025), outlining strategies for building a healthy and active ageing society. The plan focuses on income and employment, care, housing and ensuring dignified end-of-life care. Regarding income and employment, the plan seeks to enhance the state's role in alleviating poverty among older individuals, improve the security of public and private pensions and create a more accessible financial environment for older persons.

In the area of care, the plan emphasizes preventive health-care, the promotion of home-based care, comprehensive support for older individuals with dementia, the establishment of community-based care systems and improved coordination between intensive medical treatments and long-term care. For housing, the plan aims to expand age-friendly housing and transportation systems as well as supportive communities. To ensure a dignified end of life, the plan focuses on providing high-quality hospice and palliative care and establishing a support system to enhance self-determination at the end of life.⁵⁸

In China, the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Older People establishes home-based care as the foundation of elder care. The country employs the “9073 Model,” which aims for 90 per cent of older individuals to reside at home, 7 per cent in community care and 3 per cent in institutional settings.⁵⁹

China has launched a pilot LTCI programme covering 49 cities and reaching 180 million people.⁶⁰

To address the increasing care needs of its population, Thailand has implemented policies focused on community-driven care models while aiming to professionalize the caregiving workforce. To address the challenges posed by an ageing population, the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security is promoting family care, improving housing, strengthening community-based support and expanding economic opportunities. Key initiatives include the development of welfare systems, the provision of 240 hours of training for caregivers and rights protection personnel and encouragement of private-sector involvement through funding for entrepreneurship loans for older individuals. The newly introduced 2024 5x5 Let's Turn the Tide policy comprises several pillars aimed at addressing the needs of older people and promoting family security.

Pillar three, which focuses on older individuals, emphasizes preventive healthcare, flexible retirement age policies and the development of a robust care infrastructure.

It advocates for the creation of environments that foster social interaction and independent living, supported by integrated data systems for ageing-related issues. Pillar four, dedicated to persons with disabilities, highlights the importance of creating accessible environments and universal design principles to support independent living. It calls for the development of comprehensive health and rehabilitation services and the creation of tools, such as databases, to enhance employment opportunities while fostering an inclusive society.

Pillar five, which addresses family security and stability, aims to reduce inequality, enhance crisis resilience through an inclusive welfare system and stimulate economic growth at the household level. It also includes assurances of safe and accessible housing for all while emphasizing environmental restoration through a green economy.⁶¹ This aligns with the ASEAN Comprehensive Framework on Care Economy (2022), which establishes strategic priorities to create a resilient care economy, including the promotion of healthy ageing and the leveraging of opportunities in ageing societies.⁶²

While these policy responses signal an intent to boost female labour force participation, a gender-responsive approach to ageing societies and economies remains essential. Measures such as raising retirement ages and increasing migrant inflows in the care economy, particularly for skilled care workers, are important steps. However, these policies alone are insufficient. The gendered dimensions of ageing demand deeper structural changes.

To effectively address the challenges and harness the opportunities presented by demographic shifts, it is crucial to dismantle structural barriers to women’s economic empowerment through a life cycle approach. This includes promoting decent care work and establishing comprehensive care systems that recognize and support both paid and unpaid care roles. Gender-responsive policies can help reframe demographic transitions as opportunities for inclusive and sustainable development rather than challenges to be managed.

Gender considerations in responding to the demographic transition

A fundamental shift in how economies and societies respond to ageing is essential. Advancing gender equality, empowering women and girls, and building a more inclusive future require recognizing the wide-ranging and intersecting risks, vulnerabilities, and barriers that women and girls face

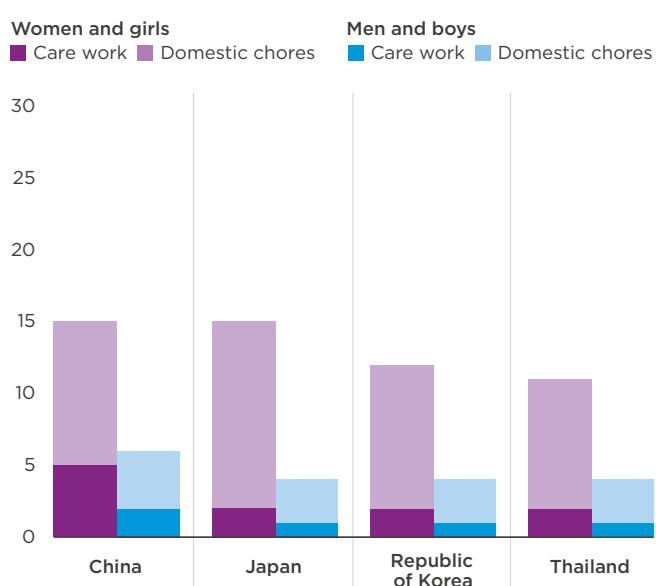
throughout their lives. These include limited power, agency and autonomy in decision-making, reduced access to and control over resources, and gender-blind systems that constrain women’s economic empowerment.

Discriminatory social norms further entrench gender disparities by assigning reproductive and domestic responsibilities primarily to women. Across the Asia-Pacific region, women and girls shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work. Time-use data consistently show significant gender gaps, with women in all four surveyed countries spending considerably more time on unpaid domestic and care work than men, regardless of age group (Figure 10).

While the demographic transition risks increasing the time women spend providing unpaid care for older adults, raising the retirement age also raises the question of who will provide unpaid childcare—a role often performed by older women within households (Infographic 1).

As populations age, the household sector alone cannot meet the increasing demand for care services without negatively affecting women’s participation in the labour market. Over-reliance on labour-intensive unpaid care work would further exacerbate time poverty among women and girls, further limiting their workforce participation. This, in turn, would reduce the overall size of the employed population, constrain economic growth and deepen gender inequalities.

FIGURE 10.
Proportion of Time Spent on Unpaid Domestic and Care Work, by Sex and Type, Latest Year (Percentage)



Note: Data refer to people aged 15 and older for China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea. Data for Thailand refer to people aged 6 and older. Data refer to 2018 for China, 2021 for Japan, 2019 for the Republic of Korea, and 2015 for Thailand.

Source: SDG Global Database.

BOX 3.

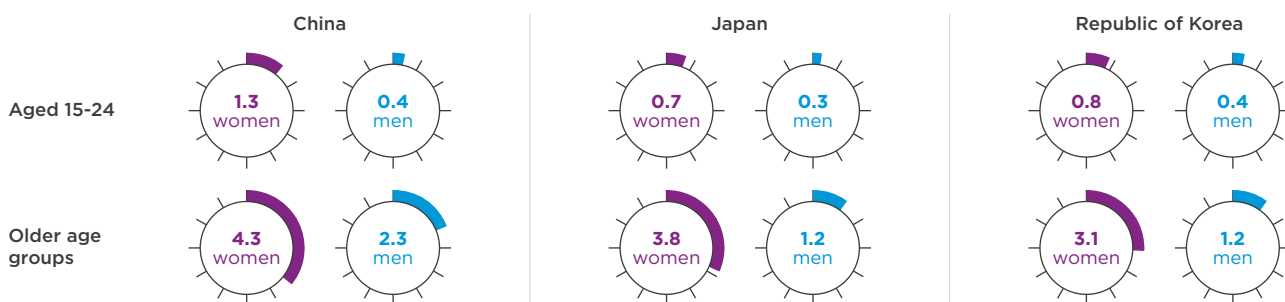
What is care?

Care encompasses a broad spectrum of activities vital for societal well-being, including direct care, which involves meeting the physical, emotional, psychological and developmental needs of care dependants, as well as indirect care, such as cooking and cleaning. These activities take place both within and outside the home. Everyone needs care and support at some stage in life, making comprehensive care systems fundamental for all individuals to participate equally in society, live with dignity and enjoy their rights.⁶³ Both paid and unpaid care work require skills and are disproportionately performed by women. Yet, they remain undervalued due to systemic inequalities related to gender, income, age, race, migratory status and other factors. While paid and unpaid care share similarities, they must function complementarily to improve care quality and enhance societal well-being.⁶⁴

INFOGRAPHIC 1.

Women in old-age groups are key providers of unpaid care services.

AVERAGE HOURS PER DAY SPENT ON UNPAID CARE



Note: Data refer to 2018 for China, 2021 for Japan, and 2019 for the Republic of Korea. Data for older age groups refer to people aged 65 and above for Japan and the Republic of Korea and to people aged 65 to 74 years for China.

Source: SDG Global Database.

Addressing the root causes of gender-based disadvantages among older persons starts at birth.

Gender gaps in unpaid care work impact women's ability to access, retain and advance in employment.

Incentivizing female labour force participation through tailored programmes and reforms is critical to ensuring that the demographic transition does not further exclude women from the economy or reinforce their disadvantaged position in labour markets. Women's disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work already limits their access to income-generating opportunities, perpetuating risks of poverty and economic insecurity in later life. Likely due to unpaid care responsibilities, young women aged 15–24 in China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Thailand are more likely than their male counterparts to be outside education, employment or training (Figure 11). Care responsibilities further constrain women's access to the labour force, with gender gaps in labour force

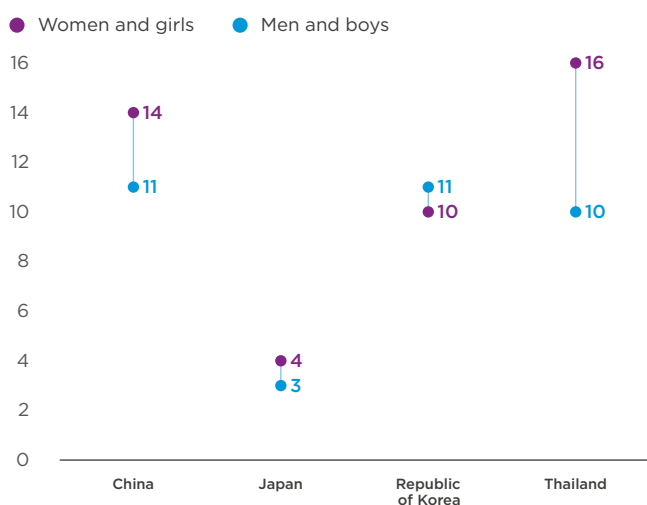
participation ranging from 17 percentage points in Japan to 11 percentage points in China (Figure 12).

Among those not in the labour force, more women than men across all age groups cite care responsibilities as the main reason for their absence (Figure 13). For instance, 75 per cent of women aged 25–54 in the Republic of Korea and 88 per cent in Thailand are outside the labour force due to care responsibilities, compared to 4 per cent and 21 per cent of men, respectively. In Thailand, the share of older people indicating care responsibilities tends to increase, with significant gender gaps.

Even when women enter the workforce, structural barriers hinder their career advancement, leading to their underrepresentation in managerial positions (Figure 14), business ownership, and sole proprietorship (Figure 15). Unequal distribution of care responsibilities, career disruptions due to motherhood, unfair pay practices and occupational gender segregation continue to drive gender wage gaps. Women continue to earn less than men.⁶⁵ According to the latest available data for OECD countries, the Republic

of Korea is one of the countries with the largest gender wage gap. Women in the Republic of Korea earn, on average, 29 per cent less than their male counterparts. Significant pay gaps exist across occupations and are particularly pronounced among professionals. Women professionals earn an average of \$24 purchasing power parity (PPP) per hour in the Republic of Korea and \$16 PPP per hour in Thailand, compared to \$37 PPP and \$18 PPP per hour for men, respectively. Similarly, among service and sales workers, women earn \$9 PPP less than men in the Republic of Korea, and \$1 PPP less in Thailand.⁶⁶

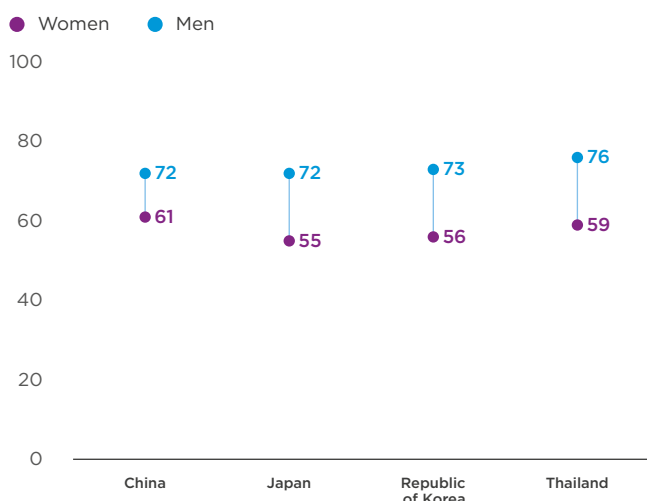
FIGURE 11.
Proportion of Youth Not in Employment, Education or Training, by Sex, Latest Year (Percentage)



Note: Data refer to 2000 for China, 2019 for Japan, 2022 for the Republic of Korea, and 2022 for Thailand.

Source: SDG Global Database.

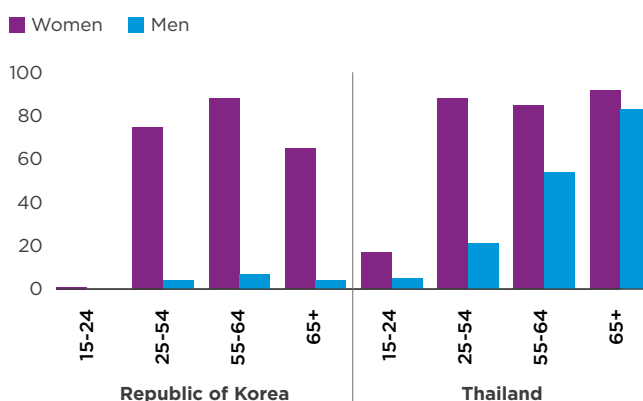
FIGURE 12.
Labour Force Participation Rate, by Sex, Latest Year (Percentage)



Note: Data refer to 2023.

Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.

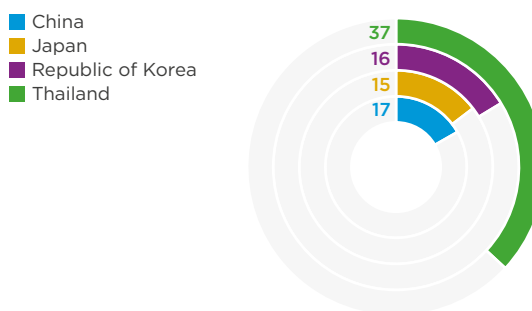
FIGURE 13.
Share of Persons Outside the Labour Force Due to Care Responsibilities, by Sex, Latest Year (Percentage)



Note: Data refer to 2023 for the Republic of Korea and 2019 for Thailand.

Source: ILOSTAT.

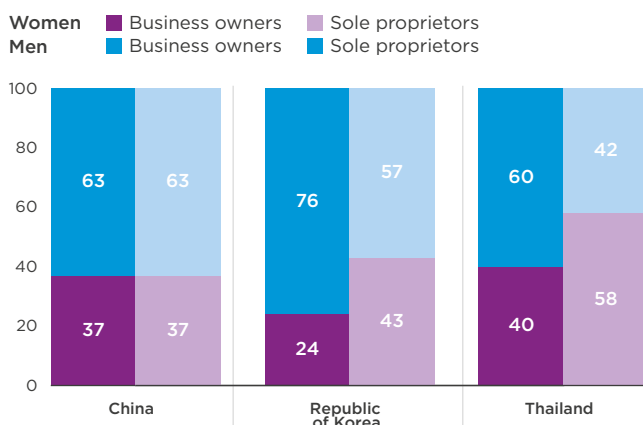
FIGURE 14.
Proportion of Women in Managerial Positions, Latest Year (Percentage)



Note: Data refer to 2005 for China, 2023 for Japan and the Republic of Korea, and 2022 for Thailand.

Source: SDG Global Database.

FIGURE 15.
Share of Business Owners and Sole Proprietors, by Sex, Latest Year (Percentage)



Note: Data refer to 2020 for China, 2016 for the Republic of Korea, and 2022 for Thailand.

Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.

Changes in population structures are driving an increased demand for care services within the economy. As the overall dependency ratio rises—primarily due to the growing old-age dependency ratio—the need for care jobs is also expected to increase.

Women represent a disproportionate share of those requiring long-term care and make up the majority of those providing it, both as unpaid caregivers and paid care workers. In 2021 in Japan, 33 per cent of women workers were employed in care occupations, compared to 12 per cent of men. In 2023 in Thailand, 9 per cent of women workers were in care employment, while only 3 per cent of men were (Figure 16).

The lack of accessible and equitable long-term care services significantly affects older individuals, families and society as a whole, with women particularly impacted due to their roles as both the majority of care recipients—largely attributed to their longer life expectancy—and the primary providers of both paid and unpaid care. The care economy, which is predominantly composed of women and often undercompensated, holds significant potential for job creation. Expanding care services and prioritizing decent work in this sector would not only benefit older individuals and their caregivers but also contribute to inclusive economic growth.⁶⁷

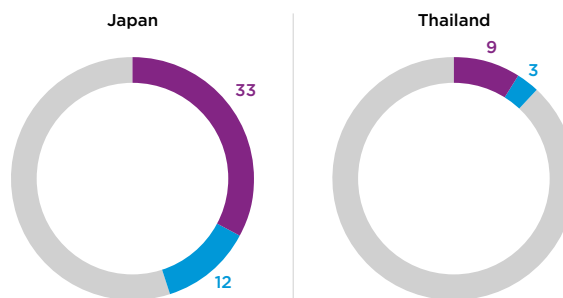
Despite the rising demand for care services, deficiencies in decent work—such as low wages and informal employment—persist, exacerbating gender gaps in pay and pensions later in life.⁶⁸ In the Asia-Pacific region, 63 per cent of women care workers are in informal employment, compared to 52 per cent of men,⁶⁹ in the sector. Where data is available, occupational segregation is clear, with more women than men working as nurses (Figure 17). Despite the growing need for care services, significant shortcomings in decent work conditions remain within this highly feminized care economy.

Addressing gender discrimination in the economy requires multifaceted interventions that adopt a comprehensive lifecycle approach in designing and implementing care policies. Rebalancing the disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work is essential to enhancing women’s agency, increasing their participation in the labour market and expanding their economic and entrepreneurial opportunities.

FIGURE 16.

Proportion of Care Workers, by Sex, Latest Year (Percentage)

- Women care workers
- Men care workers
- Workers in other sectors

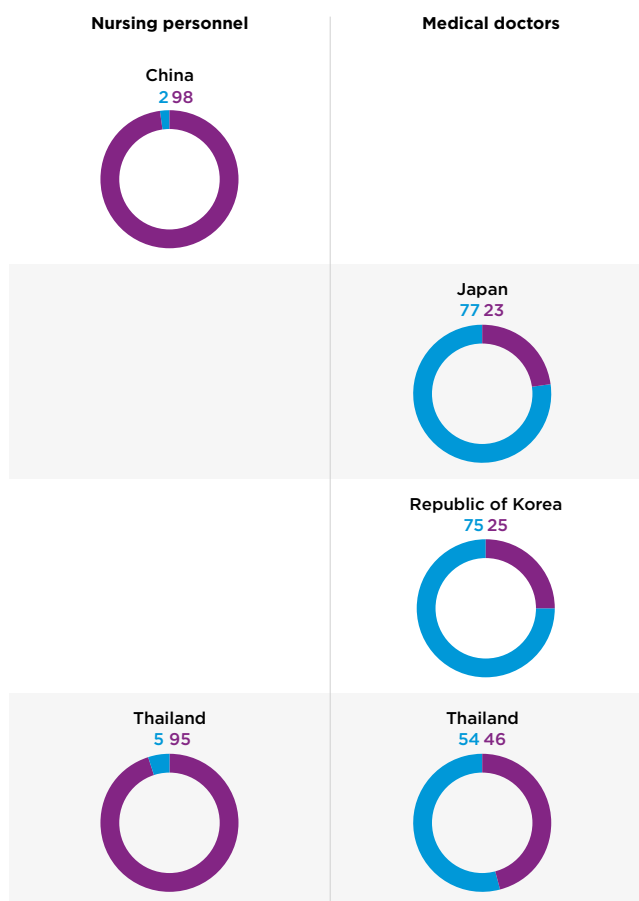


Note: Data refer to 2021 for Japan and 2023 for Thailand.
Source: Authors’ elaboration based on ILOSTAT data.

FIGURE 17.

Proportion of Health Workers, by Sex and Type of Occupation, Latest Year (Percentage)

- Women
- Men



Note: Data refer to 2017 for China, 2020 for Japan, 2021 for the Republic of Korea, and 2019 for Thailand.
Source: SDG Global Database.

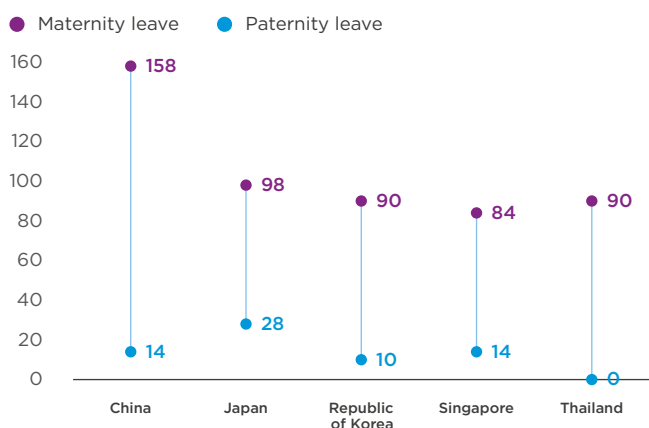
This requires comprehensive care system interventions. Disparities in paid maternity and paternity leave reflect and reinforce discriminatory norms that assign primary child-rearing responsibilities to mothers, limiting opportunities for both parents to foster strong bonds with their children. The significant gender gaps in paid parental leave highlight the need for policies that promote a more equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities and support the sustained participation of women in the workforce (Figure 18).

Inadequate maternity leave compensation in Thailand (Figure 19) lowers workforce retention rates among women after childbirth, further hindering gender equality in the workplace. Expanding social protection benefits to include primary unpaid caregivers is also critical for harnessing the potential of gender-responsive economies. However, the share of mothers of newborns covered by social protection schemes does not exceed 46 per cent across the four selected countries (Figure 20).

Furthermore, policies that incorporate childcare periods into pension benefits can significantly enhance long-term financial security, ensuring that time taken off for family obligations does not result in future disadvantages. Nonetheless, gaps persist in China and Thailand, with particularly significant implications for women who are more likely to take time off for childcare (Figure 21).

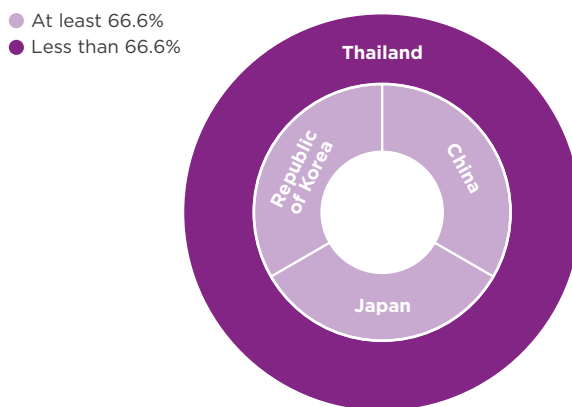
Reducing care dependency in later life requires a life cycle, intersectional and gender-responsive approach to promoting healthy ageing and preventing poverty.

FIGURE 18.
Length of Paid Paternal Leave, by Sex, Latest Year (Calendar Days)



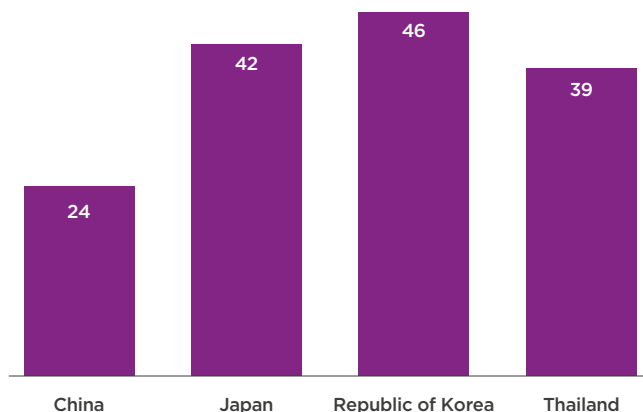
Note: Data refer to 2023.
Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.

FIGURE 19.
Percentage of Wages Paid During Maternity Leave, Latest Year



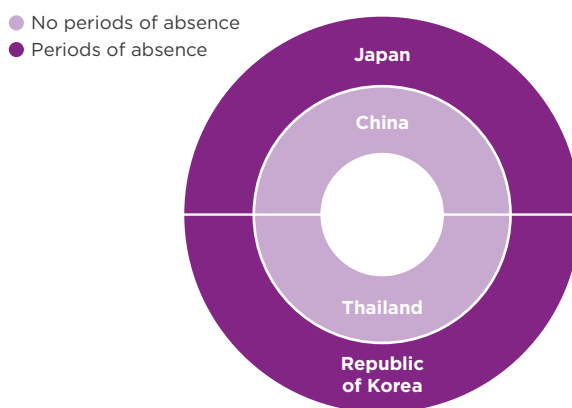
Note: Data refer to 2021.
Source: UN DESA Gender Data Hub.

FIGURE 20.
Proportion of Mothers with Newborns Receiving Maternity Cash Benefit (Percentage)



Note: Data refer to 2019 for China, 2020 for Japan and Thailand, and 2021 for the Republic of Korea.
Source: SDG Global Database.

FIGURE 21.
There Are Periods of Absence Due to Childcare Accounted for in Pension Benefits, Latest Year



Note: Data refer to 2023.
Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.

Gender-responsive care policies are essential for fostering sustainable and inclusive economic growth while enhancing overall well-being. Addressing deficiencies in care policies necessitates ambitious investments in care systems. Through cross-sectoral collaboration, sustainable resource allocation and long-term commitments, care systems can serve as the cornerstone of inclusive and resilient societies, improving outcomes for all while ensuring dignity and equity for both caregivers and care recipients.

The [ILO Care Policy Investment Simulator](#) demonstrates that investing in care leave, childcare, and long-term care services can stimulate job growth, increase GDP, and contribute to a more gender-equal world. According to the simulator, meeting labour standards in four key areas—childcare-related paid leave (maternity, paternity, and parental leave), breastfeeding breaks, early childhood care and education (ECCE), and long-term care (LTC)—delivers long-term and broad benefits beyond direct users of care services. These include job creation, reductions in gender employment and wage gaps and substantial returns on investment.

Table 1 presents the required investment and its projected outcomes for the four analysed countries up to 2035. For example, China would need to allocate 5.57 per cent of its GDP annually to implement comprehensive care policies, while Japan’s required investment is comparatively lower at 2.20 per cent. These investments could generate millions

of jobs, with over 61 million potential jobs created in China alone. They could also narrow gender gaps in employment and wages. For example, Thailand could see a 9.72 percentage point reduction in the gender employment gap, improving opportunities for women in the workforce. Japan could achieve the largest reduction in the gender wage gap—7.22 percentage points—marking a significant step towards pay equality.

In all four countries, every dollar spent on care policies could yield significant economic returns. For example, in the Republic of Korea, every dollar invested in care policies could generate \$14.64 in GDP, underscoring the high economic benefits of investing in care systems. These findings highlight that care investments are not only critical for gender equality but also essential for broader economic growth and resilience.

Responding to the demographic transition requires both care-enabling policies and gender-equalizing measures. Women’s longer life expectancy, coupled with greater morbidity, lower lifetime earnings and reduced access to resources, often leaves them entering old age with fewer savings and lower pension accumulation. The number of working-age individuals actively contributing to pension schemes serves as a critical indicator of anticipated future financial security. However, in the Asia-Pacific region, only 37 per cent of the working-age population contributes to a pension scheme, raising concerns about future coverage.⁷⁰

TABLE 1.
ILO Care Policy Investment Simulator for China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Thailand Projecting to 2035

	CHINA	JAPAN	REPUBLIC OF KOREA	THAILAND
Required gross additional annual investment - All care policies (% GDP)	5.57%	2.20%	3.86%	2.96%
Net total employment generated - ECCE and LTC (without induced effects)	61,763,170	3,313,251	1,965,193	3,405,176
Percentage point change in gender employment gap (without induced effects)	-9.88	-7.02	-6.96	-9.72
Percentage point change in gender gap in monthly wages (without induced effects)	-1.82	-7.22	-2.60	-3.08
Return On Investment (ECCE and Leave): US\$ GDP increase per US\$ spent	4.01	5.48	14.64	1.79

Note: Induced effects refer to the economic ripple effects generated by increased spending and income from the initial investment, specifically the heightened spending power of newly employed workers.

Source: Authors’ elaboration using the ILO Care Policy Investment Simulator.

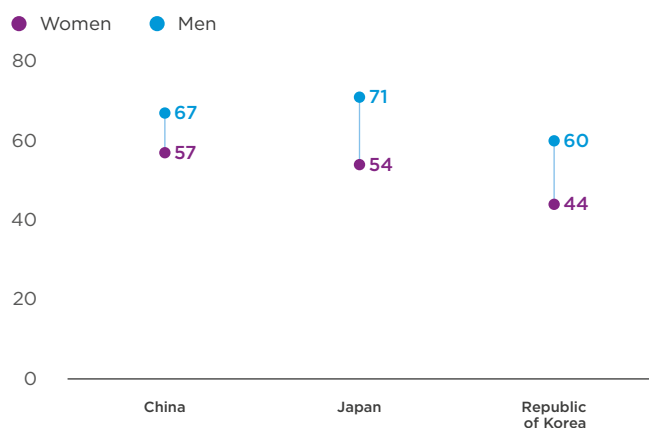
This gap is particularly pronounced among women, who are less likely than men to contribute due to lower employment rates and higher engagement in informal work. In China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea, only 57, 54, and 44 per cent of working-age women contribute to a pension scheme, compared to 67, 71, and 60 per cent of men, respectively (Figure 22).

Lower pension coverage among women exacerbates their financial insecurity in old age. Women are more likely than men to report concerns about their financial preparedness for later life (Figure 24), reflecting the cumulative impact of systemic inequalities over their lifetimes. These

challenges further highlight critical gaps in social protection systems. Government spending on essential services, including health, education and social protection, plays a pivotal role in addressing these gaps. Increased investment in these areas can improve women’s access to healthcare and social safety nets, particularly in ageing societies where the need for robust social systems continues to grow (Figure 23).

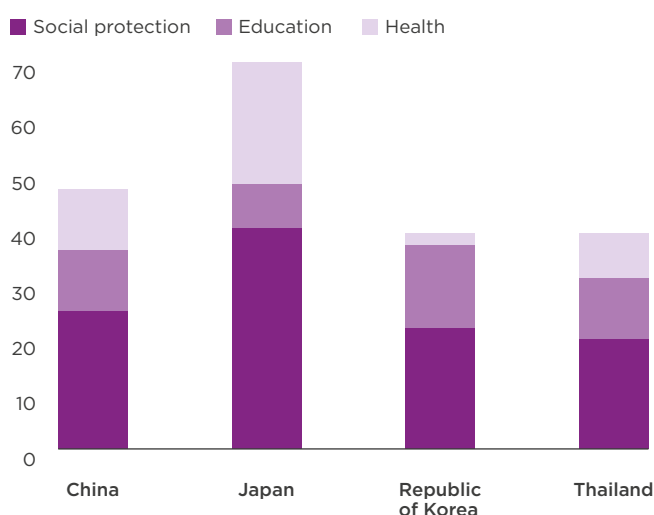
Women’s lower pension coverage and financial insecurity in old age are direct consequences of systemic inequalities accumulated over their life cycles.

FIGURE 22.
Proportion of Active Contributors to a Pension Scheme as a Percentage of the Working-Age Population (15 and Older), by Sex, Latest Year (Percentage)



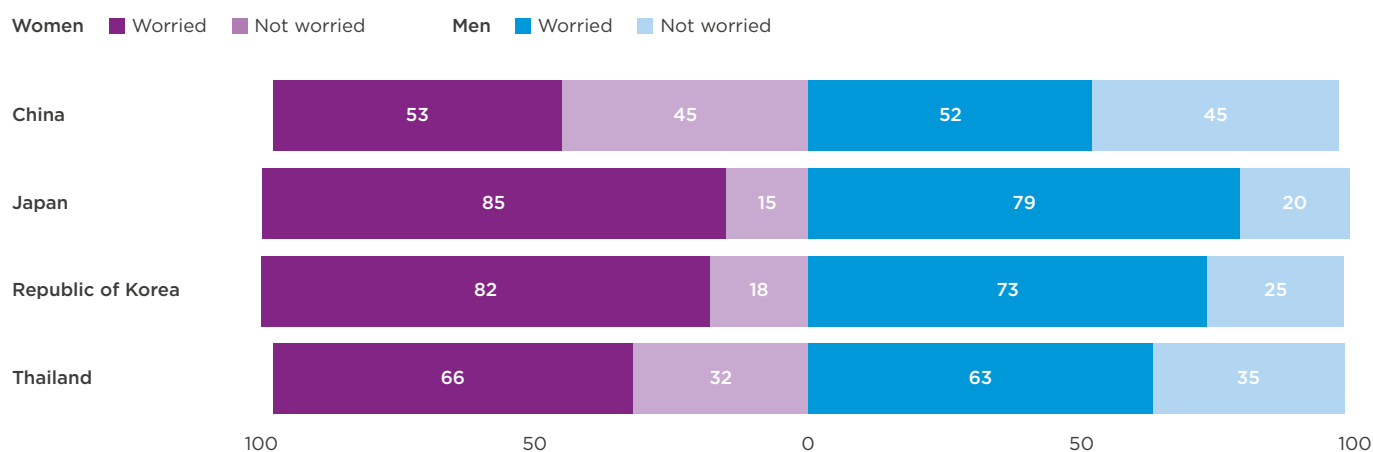
Note: Data refer to 2021 for China, 2020 for Japan, and 2022 for the Republic of Korea.
Source: ILO Social Protection Platform.

FIGURE 23.
Proportion of Total Government Spending on Essential Services, by Category, Latest Year (Percentage)



Note: Data refer to 2022 for China, Japan and Thailand, and to 2010 for the Republic of Korea.
Source: SDG Global Database.

FIGURE 24.
Proportion of People Worried About Not Having Enough Money for Old Age, by Sex, Latest Year (Percentage)

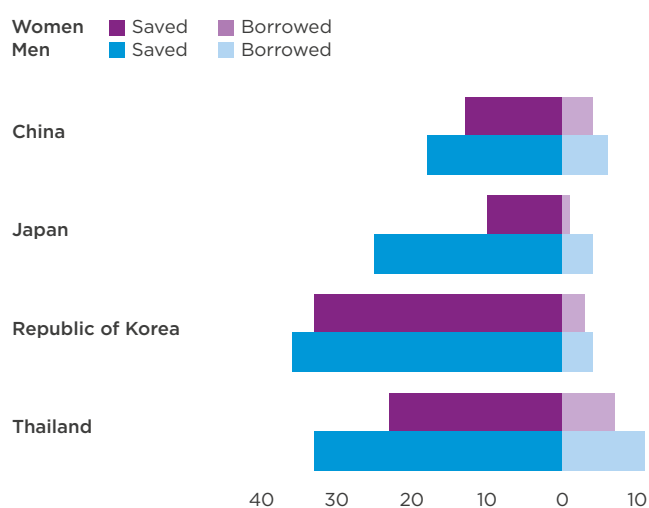


Note: Data refer to 2021.
Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.

Equal access to and control over productive resources—such as land, housing, financial assets, and other forms of wealth—enhances women’s bargaining power both within the household and in society at large. Asset ownership not only improves women’s immediate economic security but also creates long-term, intergenerational impacts. Strengthening women’s access to productive resources, including financial assets, is crucial for advancing economic security and ensuring financial resilience, particularly in old age. Furthermore, women who own assets can pass them on to their children, breaking cycles of poverty and fostering economic stability across generations.

Asset ownership also plays a key role in unlocking women’s entrepreneurial potential. Women’s limited access to and control over productive assets reduces their ability to secure loans and other forms of credit, ultimately restricting their capacity to start businesses or invest in economic activities. These disparities are evident in the analysed countries, where significant gender gaps exist in saving and borrowing for entrepreneurial endeavours. The largest gender gaps in saving to start, operate or expand a business are found in Japan and Thailand, where only 10 per cent and 23 per cent of women saved for entrepreneurial purposes, compared to 25 per cent and 33 per cent of men, respectively (Figure 25).

FIGURE 25.
Proportion of People (Aged 15 and Older) Who Saved and Borrowed to Start, Operate, or Expand a Farm or Business, by Sex, Latest Year (Percentage)



Note: Data refer to 2017.
 Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.

For women, asset ownership has transformative potential. It helps them to overcome barriers, advocate for their rights, access finance and participate more extensively in decision-making processes.

Enhancing women’s employment opportunities, working conditions, and compensation through gender-responsive legal frameworks is essential for addressing economic inequalities, empowering women and promoting economic rights for all. This is critical not only for closing gender gaps, supporting women’s participation in the labour market and enhancing their income security but also for improving labour market outcomes and strengthening human capital, particularly in the context of demographic shifts. However, none of the four countries analysed have established optimal legal frameworks that promote, enforce or monitor gender equality in employment, with China and Thailand remaining significantly distant from achieving these objectives (Figure 26).

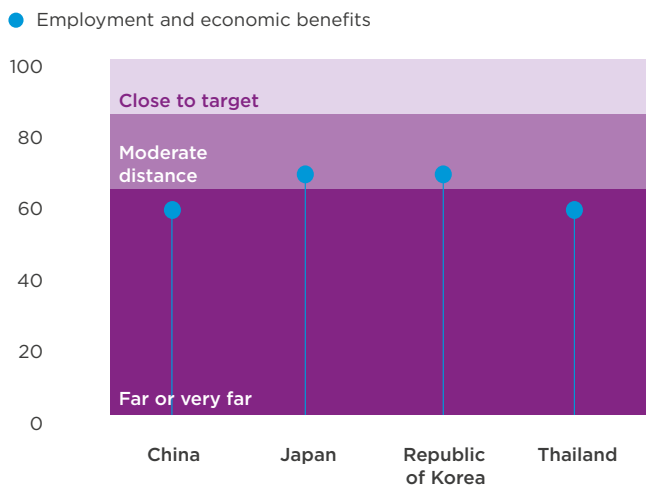
Ratifying key ILO conventions is an essential first step towards enacting gender-responsive policy actions. However, China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Thailand have yet to ratify the Home Work Convention (1996, C177), the Maternity Protection Convention (2000, C183), the Domestic Workers Convention (2011, C189), or the Violence and Harassment Convention (2019, C190).

The absence of these commitments weakens national labour frameworks and limits governments’ ability to provide comprehensive protections for vulnerable workers, particularly women and migrants. While all four countries have ratified the Equal Remuneration Convention (1951, C100) and the Employment Policy Convention (1964, C122), Japan has not ratified the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (1958, C111). China and Thailand have yet to ratify the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (1981, C156).

Adopting these ILO conventions would not only establish legal obligations but also signal national alignment with internationally recognized labour standards. This commitment is a critical foundation for driving transformative action, fostering accountability and ensuring the development of policies that address gender inequalities, strengthen protections for vulnerable workers and promote inclusive and equitable labour markets.

FIGURE 26.

Legal Frameworks That Promote, Enforce, and Monitor Gender Equality in Employment, Latest Year (Percentage)



Note: Data refer to 2022.
Source: SDG Global Database.

Empowering Women, Transforming Ageing: A Blueprint for Caring Societies and Inclusive Economies

Demographic shifts necessitate a comprehensive strategy to build caring societies and inclusive economies. This strategy must address structural barriers that women face throughout their lives and prioritize equitable care systems. A key component is ensuring that investments are directed towards transforming care systems while simultaneously creating economic opportunities for women. These opportunities may include skilling, upskilling, and reskilling, expanding financial access for entrepreneurship, and introducing family-friendly workplace policies. Addressing gender biases in the world of work also requires dismantling social norms that reinforce gendered patterns in the provision of care. In the Asia-Pacific region, the [TransformCare Investment Initiative](#) aims to shift gendered economic and social norms to create an enabling environment where women have the freedom and opportunity to join, remain and lead in the world of work, seize new economic opportunities and secure dignified employment within the care sector, as well as in other future-oriented economies such as the green and digital economy.

The extent to which policies and programmes are gender-responsive depends on their capacity to simultaneously address critical elements of economic empowerment.

Transform Care Systems

As highlighted in the [2024 United Nations Policy Paper on Transforming Care System](#), a comprehensive approach must encompass legal frameworks, services, financing, infrastructure, training, governance and social norms to support a new social organization of care. Recognizing, reducing, redistributing, rewarding and representing care work from a gender and human rights perspective is paramount. Care systems must be robust, gender-responsive, disability-inclusive and age-sensitive, ensuring that human rights are fully upheld. The development of these systems is fundamental to promoting equality and dignity, with particular attention to marginalized groups to ensure that no one is left behind.

Transforming care systems requires a fundamental shift in how informal and unpaid care work is valued in economic models and how care systems uphold the human rights of both caregivers and care recipients, aligning with the priorities outlined in [Our Common Agenda](#).

Grounded in international human rights law—including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities—this transformation must respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of caregivers and care recipients. With cross-sectoral collaboration, sustainable resources, and long-term investments, care systems can become the backbone of inclusive and resilient societies, improving outcomes for all while ensuring dignity and equity for caregivers and care recipients alike.

Adopting a Women's Economic Empowerment Lens

A women's economic empowerment lens is essential to addressing gender-based disadvantages and leveraging demographic transitions for societal benefits. Gender-responsive actions must mitigate disadvantages that accumulate across a woman's lifetime, ensuring that economic systems are rights-based, inclusive and sustainable.⁷¹ Empowering women and girls with decision-making authority, including over their reproductive rights, is critical to fostering an enabling environment where they can fully participate in the economy and society.⁷²

A gender-responsive approach is crucial for fostering equitable intergenerational progress in ageing societies. This holistic, rights-based approach addresses life cycle risks and intersecting inequalities, transforming ageing into a driver of inclusive growth. It aligns with global frameworks such as the [Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing](#)

and the [United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing \(2021–2030\)](#), which emphasize dignity and rights for older persons.

Accelerating women’s economic empowerment serves as a multiplier for achieving progress across all SDGs and advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Women’s labour force participation boosts productivity, promotes economic diversification and reduces poverty, directly supporting SDG 1 (eliminate poverty), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), and SDG 10 (reducing inequalities). Empowered women also invest in their children’s education and healthcare, contributing to SDG 3 (good health and well-being) and SDG 4 (quality education).⁷³

In ageing populations, women’s economic empowerment is essential to balancing rising care demands with opportunities for job creation and innovation in the paid care economy. Investments in care systems drive technological innovation, create business opportunities and unlock women’s potential in the labour market, reducing gender disparities and boosting economic growth. Increasing women’s labour market participation also has macroeconomic benefits, offsetting the economic losses caused by shrinking working-age populations, increasing tax revenues and stabilizing pension systems.⁷⁴

Economies that prioritize decent care work act as catalysts for women’s economic empowerment, stimulating job growth both within the sector and beyond.

Evidence-Informed Decision-Making for a More Caring and Inclusive Future

With 2025 marking the thirtieth anniversary of the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the tenth anniversary of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the role of gender data is more crucial than ever. Gender data provides essential insights for shaping effective policies and investments, enabling countries to meet national and global commitments while responding to emerging challenges and opportunities. Ensuring the well-being of individuals in ageing societies requires better and more granular gender data. While a wealth of sex-disaggregated data exists, stronger gender data ecosystems are needed to ensure that programmes and policies effectively address the needs, barriers, and risks facing women and girls throughout their life cycles.⁷⁵

Despite progress in the production, dissemination and use of gender data, many gender-related issues remain underreported or overlooked, particularly in critical sectors such as the care economy (Figure 27). Data on care employment is essential for designing policies that generate employment and maximize the impact of care economy investments.⁷⁶ Failure to incorporate the gendered dimensions of the care economy in ageing societies through gender data could result in care systems that are inadequately prepared to meet the needs of older populations.

Regular collaboration and dialogue between data users and producers is essential to ensure that statistics meet the needs of policymakers while also helping users understand available data, how to access it and how to influence its production.⁷⁷ Prioritizing the collection and use of data disaggregated by sex, age and other key characteristics is critical to ensuring that no one is left behind and that older women are both counted and visible in policy discussions.

Timely, high-quality gender- and age-specific data can guide government interventions, ensuring that the unique needs of older women are addressed in policymaking. Strengthening care data ecosystems requires increased investment in gender- and age-disaggregated data collection and use, with sufficiently granular age cohorts that capture the diverse experiences of individuals at different stages of life.⁷⁸

This approach aligns with UN system-wide efforts to redefine progress [Beyond GDP](#), adopting a more comprehensive understanding of well-being, individual agency, prosperity and environmental sustainability. Achieving this requires reimagining economic systems to focus on redistributing power and resources, generating decent work, and valuing the well-being and care of both people and the planet.

A strong commitment to evidence-informed policymaking is essential for advancing women’s economic empowerment and developing equitable, resilient, and effective care systems. Robust gender data and a gender-responsive approach to policymaking are critical in addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by demographic shifts. By integrating these principles, policies can ensure that no one is left behind and that all individuals, at every stage of life, have the opportunity to thrive and live with dignity.

FIGURE 27.

Available Data on Women’s Economic Empowerment-Related Indicators to Transform Care Systems in China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Thailand, by Domains of Change



Note: The graph presents the availability of indicators for each country where at least one data point is available.

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on indicators from the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Minimum Set of Gender Indicators (MSG), International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), and World Bank (WB). For further information, see UN Women (2024). [Caring societies, inclusive and green economies in Asia and the Pacific. Unveiling data to advance women’s economic empowerment beyond GDP.](#)

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