



Session Highlights

Background

South Asia is at a crossroads. Women are more educated and connected than ever before, yet their economic participation remains among the lowest globally. This contradiction—between rising human capital and limited economic opportunity—is constraining the region's growth and competitiveness. At the same time, rapid economic, technological, demographic, and environmental shifts are creating both risks and opportunities. Advancing women's economic empowerment is therefore a key priority—not only to accelerate progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 on gender equality, but also to build stronger and more inclusive economies and societies.

Given the complexities and the need to address the common challenges, ADB's gender team assigned to South Asia carried out a regional workshop, "Women's Economic Empowerment in South Asia – Working Together on Transformative Solutions" on 12-13 November 2025 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The event brought together about 80 participants from the government, private sector, civil society and development partners from the region to discuss emerging issues on women's economic empowerment. The regional workshop provided a timely platform for a regional dialogue on progress, learn from initiatives across the region, define practical ways to move forward on this critical agenda and inform ADB's operations with more transformative approaches for women's economic empowerment in the region.

Day 1—Understanding the Landscape

Opening Session

The workshop opened with remarks from ADB's Director for Gender Equality, Samantha Hung, and a message from Sri Lanka's Minister of Women and Child Affairs, delivered by Ketevan Chkheidze, setting the stage for a regional reflection on women's economic participation. In a fireside chat, Samantha Hung and economist Ramani Gunatilaka underscored a central challenge facing South Asia: despite rising education levels among women, this has not translated into increased economic participation—highlighting the need for stronger policies, investments, and institutional action to close this gap.

Women's Economic Empowerment in South Asia—Progress and Priorities

This session established a shared understanding of the state of women's economic empowerment in the region. Speakers from India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh highlighted progress through government programs, social protection, and skills initiatives, while noting that gains remain uneven. Discussions emphasized the importance of scaling successful models, strengthening implementation, and aligning policies with labor market needs.

Barriers to Participation—What Holds Women Back?

Panelists identified structural constraints that continue to limit women's economic participation across South Asia. Key issues included the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, lack of access to decent and green jobs, skills mismatches, barriers to STEM education, and persistent policy and institutional gaps. The discussion reinforced that these challenges are systemic and require coordinated, multi-sector responses.

Fishbowl Dialogue

Through an interactive dialogue, participants explored how the region can accelerate progress by strengthening collaboration among governments, development partners, civil society, and the private sector. The session highlighted the need for innovation, regional knowledge sharing, and more integrated approaches to women's economic empowerment.



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Day 2—From Dialogue to Action

Sectoral Deep Dive—Unlocking Opportunities

This session examined different sectors where women's participation is critical for growth and highlighted transformative approaches and policies to expand women's opportunities in emerging and traditionally male-dominated sectors, such as energy, transport, digital economy, and others. The discussion was particularly insightful and informative as representatives (Maldives, Sri Lanka, and India), from private companies (e.g. Tata Power India and John Keels Group Sri Lanka), public sector and civil society organizations (CSOs)/think tank, shared their perspectives and strategic and practical approaches. The session highlighted the importance of targeted approaches as well, e.g. targeted skills development to meet market demands, infrastructure and policy reforms that meet the needs of women and climate and green-transition sectors present both barrier and opportunities for women.

Women Entrepreneurs as Drivers of Growth

Speakers highlighted the critical role of women-led enterprises in driving inclusive growth, while noting persistent barriers in access to finance, markets, and business development services. Financial institutions and development partners shared some good practices and approaches such as tailored lending products, risk-sharing mechanisms, and targeted support programs that demonstrate the strong business case for investing in women entrepreneurs.

World Café: What - How - Now What?

Participants exchanged experiences and lessons from their respective countries, identifying common priorities and practical strategies to strengthen women's economic empowerment. The discussion reinforced the value of peer learning and regional dialogue in shaping effective solutions.

Action Labs: From Ideas to Action

Small group discussions that co-developed actionable solutions.

Visual Summary and Closing Session: The Road Ahead

The workshop concluded with a synthesis using the Futures Triangle framework, reflecting on current constraints, lessons from the past, and aspirations for the future. The discussion emphasized that advancing women's economic empowerment in South Asia will require sustained commitment, cross-sector collaboration, and forward-looking policies.

This regional workshop was organized by ADB's Gender Equality Division (CCGE) in collaboration with the South Asia Regional Department (SARD) and with support from the Sri Lanka Resident Mission. This learning event was financed through ADB's TA 10389: Promoting Gender-Transformative and Socially Inclusive Results in South Asia.