



## Report

# Walking Together: Gender Equality Futures 2042 in the Asia-Pacific Region

Sohail Inayatullah<sup>1</sup>\*, Ivana Milojevic<sup>2</sup>, Samantha Hung<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>UNESCO Chair in Futures Studies, Sejahtera Centre for Sustainability and Humanity, IIUM, Malaysia. Professor, Tamkang University, Taiwan, Futurist-in-residence, Government of Abu Dhabi, Culture and Tourism, UAE

<sup>2</sup>Director, Metafuture and Metafuture School, Brisbane, Australia

## Introduction

Over sixty gender specialists from the Asian Development Bank met to explore the futures of gender equality in the Asia-Pacific Region. Using emerging issues analysis, the futures wheel, scenarios, causal layered analysis, and visioning, participants sought not just to understand the changing external world but to collectively brainstorm on long-term gender transformative strategies.

## The Context

Over sixty gender specialists met on October 19, 2022, at the Asian Development Bank (ADB) Headquarters in Manila to explore the futures of gender equality for ADB and the Asia and the Pacific region. Participants were guided through a futures thinking process by futurists Professors Ivana Milojević and Sohail Inayatullah. Dr. Susann Roth, Advisor and Chief of Knowledge Management at ADB, welcomed participants reminding them that the virus of “Nowism” was one of the greatest problems humanity faced. We need to nudge people toward the future (Sunstein and Roth, 2022). We needed to move, as Milojević would suggest, echoing the words of feminist thinker Elise Boulding (1995), toward a 200-year present – a present where the future of grandchildren was foremost in the policies being created today. Samantha Hung, ADB Chief of Gender Equality Thematic Group asked participants that today was the day to be bold, to create novel futures, to imagine outside the box and not be bogged down by day-to-day routine problem-solving.

The context of the workshop was the Asian Development Bank’s commitment to gender equality. The Bank’s adopts (Asian Development Bank, n.d. <https://www.adb.org/what-we-do/themes/gender/overview>).

“gender mainstreaming as the key strategy for promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment across the full range of ADB operations—from country partnership strategies to the design and implementation of gender-inclusive projects and programs.

Gender equality needs to be pursued in its own right and because it is critical for sustained economic growth, faster poverty reduction, and inclusive development. Under investments in women are missed opportunities to correct gender disparities and to capture and unleash the economic and human capital potential of women.

ADB’s Strategy 2030 includes ‘accelerating progress in gender equality’ as one of its seven operational priorities. Gender performance is tracked and reported annually. “

Indeed, ADB is committed to supporting gender equality through gender inclusive projects in at least 75% of its

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [sinayatullah@gmail.com](mailto:sinayatullah@gmail.com) (S. Inayatullah)

sovereign and non-sovereign operations by 2030.” (Asian Development Bank, n.d. <https://www.adb.org/what-we-do/themes/gender/main>).

### Creating the Gender Bank

In the opening keynote, Milojević reminded participants that patriarchy had no gender. It is a system that hurts women and men and is continually perpetuated and reinvented in different forms, but that they could work together to create a new alternative system that could play a decisive role in the transformation of the region.

Inayatullah led participants on an all-day journey using a number of futures methods such as the futures triangle, emerging issues analysis, scenarios, causal layered analysis, visioning and backcasting (Inayatullah, 2015). These methods were intended to enhance futures literacy amongst participants, map emerging and alternative futures and develop strategies for transformation (ADB, 2020) while applying a gender lens. Milojević led participants through the conflict transformation process, wherein they moved from using the past and the future destructively toward using these two tenses constructively. As a result, novel solutions for conflict transformation in the present and shared futures were designed.

Overall, the vision for participants was for ADB to increasingly leverage its financing, policy engagement, knowledge support and leadership to influence the region towards a transformative gender agenda to realise gender equality. To do so, in continuing its journey of transformation from an infrastructure bank to a knowledge bank, and more recently a climate bank, participants suggested that it was time to also envision and steer ADB towards being a Gender Bank. This was particularly important given the disproportionate gender impact of climate change and the crucial role that women can play as agents of change, not to mention the incredible financial gains that could result from gender equality in the region. This Gender Bank would have gender equality in its core DNA, have equal representation of women staff at all levels, including the Board of Directors, future female Presidents, far more inclusion of other genders, of those with vulnerabilities and other stakeholders, especially those downstream impacted by Bank policies. They wished to move towards a new development model paradigm of “co-design and co-creating change”.

### The New Narratives

As part of their imagination of the future, the workshop participants created new story lines. These are meant to reframe the dialogue, to create a new story such that the categories of perceived reality change (Milojević and Inayatullah, 2015). One group, for example, imagined a future where the region would move from “walking on one leg” to “walking together”. This future would see far greater investment in the care economy and a world where women and men were equal decisionmakers in all aspects of livelihoods and care-giving.

**Table 1:** CLA. Compiled by authors.

	<b>Today</b>	<b>Transformed</b>
<b>Litany</b>	Declining female labour force participation rate (FLPR)	Equal female labour force participation
<b>System</b>	Heavy reliance on women for unpaid care work, which is a barrier for FLPR	Greater investment in the care economy Changing workplace policies and practices – equal paternity and maternity leave (parental leave)
<b>Worldview</b>	Men make decisions and are providers, women are carers	Women and men are equal partners in decision-making, livelihoods and care-giving
<b>Metaphor</b>	Walking on one foot	Walking together

Another suggested that they shift from a world where “girls follow the rules” to a future where “girls rule”.

**Table 2:** CLA. Compiled by authors.

	<b>Today</b>	<b>Transformed</b>
<b>Litany System</b>	Gender equality on paper Restrictive social norms Prevalent gender-based violence	Substantive equality Zero tolerance for violence Equal gender representation in all spheres
<b>Worldview</b>	Patriarchy	Equality and inclusion
<b>Metaphor</b>	Rules for girls	Girls rule

A third group shifted the narrative from a world where the focus was on “counting women (representation)” to a world where “women count”. In this world ADB would have many standalone gender-focused projects, a dedicated gender trust fund, and regular mandatory gender trainings for all ADB leaders and managers.

**Table 3:** CLA. Compiled by authors.

	<b>Today</b>	<b>Tomorrow</b>
<b>Litany System</b>	Gender is not bankable Lack of dedicated resources Male led governance Mansplaining Corporate targets without enough development impact	Gender-Bank Standalone focused gender projects Dedicated trust fund Gender equal or female led governance Regular mandatory gender training for leaders/managers
<b>Worldview</b>	Decision-making without gender expertise	Gender informed and justified decision making
<b>Metaphor</b>	Counting women	Women Count

A fourth group suggested that along with critical internal changes, the region itself had to change what it measured. They envisioned the shift from GDP to Wellbeing. This far more inclusive world would focus on balance with nature and just sustainability. The worldview would move from Prosperity to a world designed around Prosperity, People, and Planet, and indeed, Purpose and Partnership. In this future, the core desired narrative shifted from “survival of the strongest” to “thrive for all”. All understood that there needed to be a shift from the current perspective where “gender was not bankable” to a desired new “gender bank”.

**Table 4:** CLA. Compiled by authors.

	<b>Today</b>	<b>Tomorrow</b>
<b>Litany System</b>	GDP Man over nature	Wellbeing Just sustainability
<b>Worldview</b>	Prosperity	Prosperity, People, and Planet
<b>Metaphors</b>	Survival of the strongest	Thrive for all

### Changes Needed to be Made

Unless these changes were initiated, participants argued that the future for the Asia and the Pacific region would worsen. Climate change, robotics, the possible rise of fundamentalist regimes could make the future worse. Robotics, of course, could provide dramatic changes in terms of hours worked and relieving unpaid care burdens, but women generally would be replaced by robots without: 1. Women being part of design teams that wrote the algorithms; 2. Women being retrained with new high demand skills as new technologies took their jobs (to take full advantage of the AI boom); and, 3. Support services – networks, income reinvented – hence greater inequality could result if mitigation and proactive measures were not taken to ensure that AI became gender-responsive. And if women did increasingly move to leadership positions without deep gender-awareness education throughout the region for men and boys (as well as girls) about the importance of gender equality, then male backlash could worsen conditions for all. Thus, participants understood that the world was dramatically changing and that ADB would need to carefully navigate these changes.

## Scenarios

To understand alternatives, participants explored different scenarios of the future. These were the no change, marginal change, adaptive change, and radical change version of possible futures.

Generally, in the no change scenario, women would remain undervalued, underpaid, unskilled, overworked, face career obstacles and be increasingly vulnerable to gender-based violence and poverty. This was the deterioration of the current condition as we have seen with shocks such as COVID-19 and its disproportionate gender impacts.

In the marginal change future, there would be some improvement as more move to leadership positions but the overall system would not change – patriarchy would continue as expected (job losses from climate change, new technologies would impact women more) as well as in unexpected ways.

The groups argued that the marginal change scenario would not lead to a future where women and men walked together creating new measures such as wellbeing. An adaptive change future was needed. In this future many changes would take place, e.g., women were to be trained in STEM and green jobs; there needed to be flexible work arrangements for women; investment in safe transportation and work environments; male engagement in domestic spheres of life; climate change adaptation policies with women at the center; and women leading the robotics and AI industry. None in the room preferred a no change and marginal change future. A few argued that the adaptive change was the best to be pursued as it was realistic. This scenario addressed the changing world and understood the conservative nature of institutions and the lengthy time period between the imagination of the future and the realized future.

However, most in the room preferred a radical future. This future could emerge from agency – that is individuals working together to create the new future – or it could emerge because the old system was no longer an evolutionary best fit due to the challenges posed by climate change and new technologies.

## The Radical Future

The radical future in the imagination of these gender specialists had the following characteristics:

- One-year parental leave at the bank
- 50% of ADB staff at all levels and board members are women
- The President of the ADB is a woman

In society in general, they envisioned

- The end of traditional masculinities i.e., men as breadwinners, women as carers
- Mandatory policies of all boards demonstrating gender equality
- Paid domestic work policies
- Gross national happiness and other wellbeing measures as the norm for most nations in the region
- Genderless identities
- Customized affordable robots and other AI technologies tailored for individuals in a gender-responsive manner, responding to their wellbeing needs
- Gender equality fully visible in all industries and agencies

In this future, at a personal level, by 2042 participants would look back on their work in the past twenty years, thank those gender specialist champions that came before them, and marvel at their success.

## Conclusion

Thriving, walking together, the co-design of new technologies, a world beyond gender identity and an ADB that has dramatically succeeded in becoming first a climate and then a gender bank, will make the difference. The final workshop process concluded with this radical future of 2042 now being considered a reality.

Of course, participants understood the weights of history – the power of patriarchy, the power to define reality in narrow ways, traditional hierarchical organizational systems, women not always supporting each other, and old measures of accounting were deep entrenched structures.

But ultimately participants believed that if they worked together, moved from “I” to “we” and imagined outside

the box, they could create a positive future, if not the radical, at least the adaptive.

## References

- Asian Development Bank (n.d). Gender Equality and Development. <https://www.adb.org/what-we-do/themes/gender/overview>.
- Asian Development Bank (n.d). Gender Equality and Development. <https://www.adb.org/what-we-do/themes/gender/main>.
- Asian Development Bank (2020). *Futures Thinking in Asia and the Pacific: Why Foresight Matters for Policymakers*. ADB.
- Boulding, E and Boulding, K. (1995). *The Future: Images and Processes*. Sage.
- Inayatullah, S. (2015). *What Works: Case Studies in the Practice of Foresight*. Tamkang University.
- Milojevic, I. and Inayatullah, S. (2015). Narrative Foresight. *Futures*, 73: pp. 151-162.
- Sunstein, C. and Roth, S. (2022, November 4). How Behavioral Science Can Help Fight Climate Change. <https://blogs.adb.org/blog/how-behavioral-science-can-help-fight-climate-change>.