

CONNECTING ECONOMIES, EMPOWERING WOMEN

Regional Trade and Connectivity in South Asia



SOUTH ASIA REGIONAL
TRADE FACILITATION PROGRAM

A Partnership of the World Bank—Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2015-2024)



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The

South Asia Regional Trade Facilitation Program, or SARTFP, is a regional trust fund administered by the World Bank and financed by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

SARTFP has supported women's economic empowerment through trade facilitation and connectivity in the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal sub region.

Focus areas _____



Transport
Connectivity
Development



Trade Facilitation
and Trade Policy



Local Enterprise
and Economic
Development

Total
41 grant
activities

316 knowledge
products

152 stakeholder
events

24 SARTFP-financed activities informed

43 World Bank
investments, worth over **\$10** billion



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CONTENTS

Introduction Page **06**

Road to Jobs and Dignity

*Supporting women's economic empowerment
in transport and regional connectivity* Page **08**

Bangladesh

Women at the Forefront of Revitalizing Tourism

*Unlocking South Asia's shared heritage to
drive women's inclusion and prosperity* Page **14**

Bhutan

Sailing the Uncharted Waters

*Addressing gender-blind transport systems with
inclusive and safe inland waterways* Page **20**

India

Building Agri-Entrepreneurs across South Asia

*Strengthening women's participation in
regional value chains and trade* Page **26**

Nepal

Empowering Women in the Power and Utilities Sector

*Advancing STEM education, technical skills,
and leadership* Page **32**

Sri Lanka



INTRODUCTION

The World Bank's South Asia Regional Integration and Engagement Program supports transboundary cooperation for greater connectivity, cross border trade, climate resilience, and human development in the region. Gender inclusion is a key focus of the program, ensuring that all women stakeholders benefit equitably from regional integration efforts.

With support from the South Asia Regional Trade Facilitation Program (SARTFP), which was financed by the Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the World Bank promoted regional growth and women's economic empowerment through trade and connectivity primarily along the Eastern Corridor of South Asia across the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal) countries. With special attention to women-owned and micro businesses, it achieved a first in mainstreaming gender in regional projects and programs across the entire South Asian region, including in distant communities.

SARTFP supported World Bank's South Asia

Region's Gender Innovation Lab, and Community of Practice on Women's Economic Empowerment in South Asia, which produced rigorous systematic reviews, evidence briefs, synthesis papers, and applied tools on enabling economic opportunities and agency for women. This provided a strong foundation for several World Bank operations, as well as to informed discussions with regional stakeholders.

Several in-country programs were supported to leverage increased regional connectivity to benefit women. Often these initiatives led to an integrated approach to women's economic empowerment, poverty reduction, value chain development, and market competitiveness.

Some of these include promoting local women entrepreneurship in sectors such as transboundary tourism and agricultural trade. For instance, with SARTFP support, the World Bank facilitated the Business, Enterprise and Employment Support (BEES) network, which brings together South Asian



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non-profit organizations that primarily support grassroots women producers and entrepreneurs. This network leveraged knowledge sharing, learning, collective action, and advocacy on women's economic empowerment so that successful interventions could be scaled up to help women climb out of poverty.

Evidence shows that access to safe and inclusive transport supports enhanced economic activity and social growth for women¹. SARTFP-funded initiatives improved market access and economic opportunities for women through inclusive water transport. The activities also popularized the concept of regional economic corridors, benefiting women and unreached communities. They leveraged information technology for cheaper and improved access to multi-modal logistics for women and small traders.

Other supported initiatives informed a new automated system which simplifies trade procedures at the border, particularly for women traders by establishing separate

processing desks and introducing tariff policy considerations.

With SARTFP support, the World Bank also launched the South Asia Women in Power Sector Professional Network (WePower) in 2019. The regional network, which is now a close-knit partnership of 50 organizations, is helping promote gender diversity and leadership in the gender-blind power and utility sector and promote greater participation of girls in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education.

Overall, SARTFP-financed activities led to significant changes for women at the ground level improving their quality of life, empowering them to prosper, and actively participate in and benefit from the market-led economy. The stories of five women, shared below, present a few examples in which the World Bank projects supported women across South Asia while also apprising that the journey to gender equity and prosperity is a continuous process.

¹Safe and inclusive transport and mobility, ESCAP, 2020



ROAD TO JOBS AND DIGNITY

**Supporting women's
economic empowerment
in transport and regional
connectivity**

*Western Economic Corridor
and Regional Enhancement
Program*

Case Study: **Bangladesh**



In 2004, when Halima Begum lost her husband, she struggled to make ends meet and support her two young kids. Odd jobs earned her a daily wage of around \$1 and the family could barely eat three meals a day.

Since 2020 onwards, Halima was employed by the Labor Contracting Society initiative—formal groups created by Government of Bangladesh to provide guaranteed employment to the poor. Halima is one of the 795 women who are working for the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) under the first phase of the World Bank-financed Bangladesh Western Economic Corridor & Regional Enhancement (WeCARE) Program. The program helps provide efficient, safe, and resilient connectivity along a section of the regional transport corridor, with a strong focus on women employment. These women have been trained in various skills including road maintenance, restoring roadside slopes, repairing bridge edges, filling sand potholes, and clearing culvert channels. Halima is now self-sufficient, and with her small saving, she has rented a piece of land which allows her to cultivate rice for one person. She has also bought a goat and wishes to raise a flock someday.

“

I have been working on this project for the last three years. I don't have to reach out to people for help anymore. My neighbors also respect me now. I have a small piece of land, where I can cultivate rice for a single person for months. If this work is extended for another three years, I can save more money, raise a few cows and goats. I would not have to worry about the future.

Halima Begum

45 years, Jessore, Bangladesh

”

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Western Economic Corridor and Regional Enhancement Program (WeCare) aims to develop efficient, safe, and resilient connectivity along a regional transport corridor in Western Bangladesh and support local economic development, with a gender-focused lens in the hinterland of the corridor.





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CHALLENGE

Gender balance in the transport sector and market spaces is challenging in the context of South Asia. Women face multiple barriers at the societal, institutional, and individual levels, and are often stigmatized when working on their own in public places. Lack of female-friendly facilities, such as separate toilets with doors that close, constrain women's mobility and ability to work in infrastructure projects and market spaces. In addition, household responsibilities especially child-rearing, play an important role at an individual level and influence women's choices to work outside. For the implementation of the WeCare Program, the challenge was to identify and address gaps at policy, regulatory, institutional, and operational level—including gender gaps—to ensure inclusion of women in local economic development.

INTERVENTION

SARTFP-funded activities supported mainstreaming gender in the program design and implementation, with gender assessments and action plans to promote women's economic empowerment in regional transport corridors and logistics. Five reports and analytics including gender assessments, feasibility reports, road safety surveys, economic and financial analysis, and a report on prioritizing rural infrastructure, supported project preparation and outlined action plans. The analysis also prioritized methodology that was cognizant of women's trading and transportation needs, role of transport in women's economic empowerment, and the associated risks, including of human trafficking. Through the establishment of women-friendly rural and transport infrastructure, designated stall spaces for female vendors, and introduction of childcare facilities, the World Bank's WeCare program aims to address societal, institutional, and individual barriers for women to regain their livelihoods and economic empowerment.



Female labor force participation was mainstreamed in regional connectivity projects. In the **first phase of WeCare Program**, the Local Government Engineering Department employed

795 women

in road construction and maintenance. Childcare facilities have been included to allow women to better balance their household and work responsibilities, thus contributing to increase in their labor force participation.



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Financial counseling helped

94% of the women

build savings between \$400 to \$1,500 compared to only 25% of women with savings before the program.

Over

91%

of the women employed were able to meet day-to-day expenses compared to

13%

at the start of the program.



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Entrepreneurship opportunities

for women at rural markets were ensured by allocating **a special space for female vendors and establishing functioning bathroom facilities** for them at market space. These actions are expected to increase female entrepreneurship at these market locations.

WOMEN AT THE FOREFRONT OF REVITALIZING TOURISM

**Unlocking South Asia's
shared heritage to drive
women's inclusion and
prosperity**

*Program for the Development of
the Buddhist Circuit in South Asia*

Case Study: **Bhutan**



Pema Lhamo, 65, is the lead member of the women-led community group, *Nobgang Tsherim Detshen*. The group was created in 2021 to revive the cultural vibrancy of the Nobgang village in Central Bhutan and was trained to manage two community-led social enterprises—a traditional restaurant and a Bed and Breakfast. Supported by the World Bank, Bhutan’s Department of Culture prepared a “Cultural Stewardship Plan” for Nobgang for revitalization and restoration of the village in a culturally sensitive and climate resilient manner. The plan explored avenues to add value to local agricultural products and create income generating opportunities for women and youth.

As a part of the effort, the Department of Culture restored a traditional L-shaped *kabu-darcham* building, which was built in the 18th century by hermits. The building was adapted for use and handed over to the community. Pema and her team of five other women and a man, were trained in hospitality sector to run the restaurant and the Bed and Breakfast in this building. With upgraded skills, Pema and her team now run this community enterprise, offering traditional and authentic experiences to the tourists.

“

I always loved cooking traditional dishes for my children and relatives. This program helped me gain new skills in hospitality sector including in food safety and housekeeping. Now I can integrate my traditional skills and new knowledge into our restaurant and home stay. It has increased my confidence, income levels, and provided us all with an opportunity at our doorsteps. This experience has allowed me to understand that opportunities exist for everyone, regardless of age or gender.

Pema Lhamo

65 years, Nobgang, Bhutan

”

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Buddhist Circuit Development Project aims to provide sustainable solutions for improving urbanization and living conditions, enhancing asset management and protection, and promoting local economic development and tourism along the Buddhist Circuit in South Asia.





©Department of Culture, Bhutan

CHALLENGE

South Asia has unstructured intra-regional movement of about one billion people, who are driven by its cross-border rich and diverse cultural and natural assets, visits to relatives, and businesses. This holds a major potential to build people-to-people connectivity in this least integrated region and overcome socioeconomic deprivations among the poorest and vulnerable groups including women in the remote pockets. While globally tourism employment consists of 50% women, in South Asia's Buddhist destinations, that span across the region, only 2% of women are employed by the tourism sector.

INTERVENTION

During Phase I of the World Bank project, between 2016-2018, SARTFP supported formulation of the *Buddhist Circuit Strategy* and a series of tools and guidelines were prepared on sustainability-driven development. This included an analysis on private sector investments and the design of the first inclusive tourism project financed by the World Bank in India—the *Uttar Pradesh Pro-Poor Tourism Development Project*, and the preparatory work for the *Madhya Pradesh Inclusive Tourism Project*.

The Phase II (2019-2021) assisted the governments of Nepal and Bhutan to implement policies and formulate sub-regional plans for inclusive and resilient territorial development, while unlocking economic opportunities for vulnerable women and communities living along the Buddhist Circuit. This included Greater Lumbini Area Development Plan framework, Punakha – Wangdue Phodrang Regional Development Plan, and Bhutan's Cultural Landscape Regional Development Planning Framework.



IMPACT



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Over

15 local women

from vulnerable communities run the *Amma Café*, a **social enterprise at Lumbini**. These women were provided daily literacy classes, life-skills, gender-based violence and hospitality trainings, and cooking trainings with local chefs.



©Department of Culture, Bhutan

Over
120
vulnerable
women
entrepreneurs

were trained and supported via
Amma Women Foundation.
These women include local
weavers, tailors, artisans,
beekeepers and organic farmers.

In Central Bhutan, a women-led
community group,

Nobgang Tsherim Detshen

prepared a stewardship plan for
the revitalization of the village.



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This group was trained to manage
community-led social enterprises,
and support was provided to start a
traditional **Nobgang restaurant**, and
Nobgang Bed and Breakfast,
bringing income-generating
opportunities
right at their
doorstep.

SAILING THE UNCHARTED WATERS

Addressing gender-blind transport systems with inclusive and safe inland waterways

Assam Inland Water Transport Project

Case Study: **India**



Runu Hazarika is a mother of four and a grandmother. In her village Majgaon in North Guwahati, Assam, she has another unique distinction. She is one of the few women owners and operators of a *Bhutbhuti*, a small traditional boat which is used for transportation across the Brahmaputra river in Northeast India.

Five years ago, when her husband passed away, Runu took over the mantle of his small transportation business. Initially hesitant, she found about the *Jibondinga Scheme* of the Assam Inland Water Transport Authority, which provided incentives to modernize and mechanize boats with marine engines, improving safety and efficiency. The scheme also encouraged women to apply and seek economic opportunities as vessel owners and operators. Runu, who is among the 35 women applicants, has been running the transport business for the last four years now. The boat, which is her main source of income, is equipped with marine engine, and a front and a back gear. It is safer, more reliable, and easier to operate.

“

I am probably the only woman in my village who is running the local water transportation business. People around me are very supportive and always encourage me to grow and uplift my business. The boats are now mechanized with a marine engine, which has made it easier for us to operate the boats and has increased opportunities for women to venture into transportation business. It has addressed the safety concerns of the boat operators, especially women, and has improved the water transport experience both for operators and passengers. I am now earning a living, and also serving my community.

Runu Hazarika

47 years, Majgaon, Assam, India

”

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Assam waterways links to the key transport corridors with Bhutan and Bangladesh and provides connectivity to large sections of rural and urban communities in the North east region in India. The Assam Inland Water Transport Project (AIWTP) aims to improve the ferry infrastructure and inland water transport services, making the ferries more sustainable, inclusive, and accessible, and overall support women's economic participation including in trade and ownership of water transport vessels.





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CHALLENGE

Eastern South Asia has an extensive network of inland waterways which connect India's north-east region to Bangladesh and Bhutan. Many of the communities here are highly dependent on waters for access to economic opportunity and connectivity. Overall, the 3,500 kms of the Eastern Waterways Grid in the region has the potential to rejuvenate the economies of the eastern subcontinent, generating rich dividends for the region's 600 million people. But women are not equal partners in this development story.

As per a SARTFP-supported study, in parts of Assam, 71% of male respondents were using inland water transport (IWT) for trade and transportation as compared to barely 28% of women. Some of the challenges for women commuters included poor access, lack of basic amenities such as toilets and drinking water, infrequent ferry services, potential for sexual harassment, and ineffective complaints mechanism. This discouraged the use of inland water transport, and their greater participation in economic activities like trade.

room, dedicated areas for differently abled passengers, and appropriate causeways with protective handrail for barrier-free access. Dedicated seats for women, well-lit spaces, installation of closed-circuit television cameras, and public address systems at the terminals were also incorporated in the project design to ensure socially inclusive IWT development.

Based on the recommendations of the study, the Assam Inland Water Transport Project is also designed to enable economically disadvantaged women producers, entrepreneurs, and small-scale traders to connect with value-added chains that can boost their participation and profits. The project has also been designed to provide an enabling environment for women to engage as service providers in the IWT sector and encourage women entrepreneurs. For instance, the "jibondinga" scheme was introduced to improve fleet safety and operational standards and it encouraged more women to apply for vessel ownership and to become fleet operators.

INTERVENTION

SARTFP financed the World Bank study on Gender-Inclusive Inland Water Transport and Trade Facilitation in Assam, which helped mainstream gender in Assam Inland Water Transport project preparation and design. To address the challenges faced by women commuters, the project incorporated the design for gender-inclusive terminals and ferries. These included gender-segregated and wheelchair-accessible toilets, nursing





IMPACT

Hours of operation of ferry services increased from

10 hours to

15 hours

per day with night navigation facilities.

With gender-inclusive design changes to ferries and terminals, improved frequency, and enhanced operations hours with night navigation services, the ridership and usage of ferries doubled from

1 million in 2019 to

2 million

(avg 27% women users) in 2022



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Women self-help groups and women entrepreneurs were provided additional incentives in

“Jibondinga” scheme

which facilitated vessel ownership and modernization of fleet to improve safety and operational standards of ferry services. **Out of**

825 applications, 35 were women.



BUILDING AGRI-ENTREPRENEURS ACROSS SOUTH ASIA

Strengthening women's participation in regional value chains and trade

*Advancing Women's Enterprises
for Economic Impact in the
Farm/Non-farm Value Chain
and Regional Trade*

Case Study: **Nepal**



Maya Gurung runs her small business Chandan fiber, a cottage industry unit where women make yarn and weave sustainable products from cardamon fiber. In 2011, when Maya set up her small shop, there was little known about the value of cardamon fiber, its associated products, and the critical role women play informally in this sector. In 2019, the study on *Understanding the Role of Women Home-Based Workers in the Value Chains of Large Cardamom and Allo in Nepal* focused on the integral role of women in these supply chains and recommended measures for products expansion and to improve working conditions for women. The study also identified ways to upgrade value, improve processes in post-harvest production, and position the value-added products for domestic and international markets.

Using some of these recommendations, Maya has grown her business with upgraded equipment, and improved finished product designs. She now has 14 employees, and actively promotes her products, which are washable, durable, and use natural dyes. The products are also being sold by SABAH Nepal, a non-profit organization. Maya's profits have jumped from 100-140% of her costs in 2018 to over 200% at present. As the sole entrepreneur of cardamom fiber in Eastern Nepal and the chairperson of the technical group focused on large cardamom fiber products, Maya collaborates with local governments and municipalities to train women in this sector and earns an additional \$60 per day.

“

I am happy to see that the role played by women in cardamom value chains is being recognized and that multiple stakeholders are encouraging us to grow bigger as entrepreneurs. We thought that the traders and middlemen did not understand our problems, but now it is good to see that they are being sensitized and are responsive to our issues.

Maya Gurung

52 years, Owner Chandan fiber, Koshi Province, Nepal

”

ABOUT THE PROJECTS

Two projects, *Advancing Women's Enterprises for Economic Impact in the Farm/Non-farm Value Chain and Regional Trade*, and *Strengthening the BEES Network toward Increased Access to Markets and Trade Facilitation for Grassroots Women Producers*, aimed to strengthen and mainstream participation of woman in regional value chains via analysis, recommendations, and support to a network of local grassroots organizations, many of which work with rural producers, and entrepreneurs, particularly women.





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CHALLENGE

In South Asia, a key limitation to greater economic growth and development is the lack of women's economic empowerment. The region has the second-lowest regional female labor force participation rate at 22% for women against 77 % for men. More than half of working women in South Asia are in the informal sector, which is often characterized by low wages, lack of social protection and no legal recognition. Studies have also shown that women are generally excluded from most trade activities and when women are involved, they are mostly related to the lower and less remunerative levels of production value chains and their participation is largely informal and undocumented².

In Eastern South Asia, there are great opportunities for establishing formal value chains, particularly for raw material and agricultural products. However, these opportunities are not equally accessible to women. For instance, women farmers engage in intensive work but often have limited access to credit, modern processing methods, and bargaining power, resulting in minimal profits. Furthermore, the sector is largely unorganized, with significant information asymmetries that restrict women's ability to access profitable markets and engage effectively in the existing or upcoming value chains.

INTERVENTION

SARTFP financed the World Bank study on *Understanding the Role of Women Home-Based Workers in the Value Chains of Large Cardamom and Allo in Nepal*, which examined the role of women in the large cardamom value chain. The study concluded that the efforts to improve returns from large cardamom and address associated crop challenges must employ a women-oriented lens. It proposed interventions including the promotion of cardamom to increase its value and global market positioning; the introduction of women-friendly, modern production and processing technology along the value chain; and women's collectives and institutions.

To strengthen women entrepreneurship and regional value chain participation, with SARTFP financing, the World Bank supported the Business, Enterprise and Employment Support (BEES) Network for Women in South Asia. The Network is a regional alliance of 15 leading non-profit organizations that mainly work on strengthening women economic empowerment at the grassroots, supporting agriculture producers, artisans, handicrafts producers and entrepreneurs.



IMPACT

Increased awareness among government sector, women workers, and stakeholders about the potential of regional value chains. In 2019, an event on **Large Cardamom Value Chain Development Prospects** attracted over

125

 participants,

including government officials from Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan, as well as representatives from various organizations, producers, traders, and development partners.



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In 2019, the **BEES network** was formally registered as a legal entity and it developed a five-year standard operating plan. The network has a combined direct outreach of approximately

6.5 million

women (and indirectly, an additional 17.1 million), across all eight South Asian countries.

A partnership between **SABAH Nepal** and the **BEES Network**

supported **women honey entrepreneurs**

in Nepal's remote Pyuthan and Achham districts.



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The initiative strengthened beekeeping skills, provided business startup support, and improved branding and market linkages of women entrepreneurs. **This transformed honey producer groups** into viable businesses, increasing profits by

30%

and boosting sales volumes.



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EMPOWERING WOMEN IN THE POWER AND UTILITIES SECTOR

**Advancing STEM
education, technical
skills, and leadership**

*South Asia Gender and Energy
Facility I & II*

Case Study: **Sri Lanka**

Lanka Perera, mother of three, has been working with Ceylon Electricity Board since the last 10 years. During this time, she has oscillated between varied roles in power distribution, project management, and enterprise resource planning. Lanka says being a mid-career professional she felt her scope for growth and experience was limited, and opportunities to refresh her knowledge and learn new skills were far and few.

In 2023, Lanka joined the WePower SAR-100 training program, which provided specialized technical and leadership training to 101 mid-career women professionals from South Asia. The program included 10 hybrid modules spread over eight months. It concluded with a capstone week, and a graduation ceremony in Bangkok in March 2024.

For Lanka and other participants, the SAR-100 program provided an opportunity to refresh knowledge about the planning of power systems, design, and integration of renewable energy. It also exposed them to emerging technologies like machine learning and artificial intelligence and their role in asset management and energy market transformation. The SAR-100 program was an opportunity to collaborate with women professionals from other countries in the region, share knowledge, and learn from each other's work culture, ethics, and particular policies for women employees. Lanka says the program helped her and others discover new frontiers that women engineers are conquering.



The SAR-100 training helped me gather new perspectives, and the collaborations with fellow engineers and trainers were very helpful. It is like a constant support group for technical matters to personal. It was an eye opener to learn from their personal experiences and knowledge. There is still a conscious and unconscious bias against women in this field. If someone questions why we are appointing a female for an operational or a technical role, I often cite examples of women in the SAR-100 program, from Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Maldives, and India and how they are working as power plant engineers or maintenance engineers and are conquering all barriers.

Lanka Perera

44 years, Electrical Engineer, Ceylon Electricity Board, Sri Lanka



ABOUT THE PROJECT

South Asia Gender and Energy Facility I & II

The South Asia Gender and Energy Facility (SAGE II) is a cross sectoral collaboration between the World Bank's South Asia Energy and Social Development units. It is a continuation of SAGE I, which expanded the Bank's successful operational response for reducing gender gaps in the South Asia energy sector through the Bank's investments and analytic and advisory work.





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CHALLENGE

In South Asia, the share of women participating in the workforce is the second lowest globally. The share of women working in the energy sector, that is traditionally dominated by men, is even lower. A baseline assessment of the status of women in the energy sector (2018) reflected that female representation varied between 3% and 25%, and that of women engineers and technical employees was even lower—between 1% and 21%. It also highlighted that most women tend to work in the middle to lower-level nontechnical positions, and overall, female enrollment in engineering programs was low at 0.5% to 31%.

INTERVENTION

To close gender gaps in the growing energy sector in South Asia, the World Bank, with support from SARTFP, launched the South Asia Women in Power Sector Professional Network (WePower) in 2019. The network aims to advance greater workforce participation of women in the energy sector, and promote normative change to increase enrollment of women and girls in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education. The network is now a close-knit partnership of 50 power utilities and energy sector organizations that are promoting gender diversity, inclusion, employment, and leadership for women professionals and students. SAGE II serves as the interim secretariat for WePower.



IMPACT



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Trainings, policy and normative changes, and capacity building efforts have supported hiring of

882
women
professionals,

and internships for over **21,317**
women students and graduates.

To support gender-inclusive work infrastructure, over **190 facilities** and services were provided at power and energy utilities, benefitting over

5,150 employees.

These included childcare services, lactation rooms, separate restrooms for women at work and in field, and safe transport services. A few WePower partners also introduced institutional policy changes like anti-workplace harassment policies for women and WePower internships.

Over **30 field visits** to power and utility sites, and **136 workshops** on STEM outreach reached over

9,400 girls.

101 mid-career women professionals

graduated with the WePower SAR-100 training certificate in March 2024. The 8-month technical training, delivered by the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) in Bangkok, helped these women professionals upgrade their technical and leadership skills, and forge partnerships with women in this sector across the region.



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South Asia Gender and Energy Facility also supported **gender analysis** for the design of several World Bank power sector projects to ensure gender inclusive design, and activities that promote employment of women, regional knowledge sharing and learnings.

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The **World Bank's South Asia Regional Integration, Cooperation, and Engagement (RICE) approach** is a framework to create a stronger, more resilient region which focuses on three primary themes: enabling regional connectivity, increasing climate resilience, and investing in human capital. The framework, adopted in 2020, has been extended to 2025. The regional work with countries uses a mix of tools and approaches including partnerships with other development partners, platforms for dialogue and communication to develop consensus, and innovative social and economic analyses to lay the building blocks for inclusive approaches to trade facilitation and cross-border investments.

Government of Australia's **Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)** promotes and protects Australia's international interests to support national security and prosperity. DFAT works with international partners and other countries to tackle global challenges, increase trade and investment opportunities, protect international rules, keep the region stable and help Australians overseas. DFAT and World Bank South Asia have a longstanding and productive engagement on regional integration under the Partnership for South Asia program which houses critical trust funds such as the South Asia Regional Trade Facilitation Program and South Asia Regional Infrastructure Connectivity Program.

The **South Asia Regional Trade Facilitation Program (SARTFP)** is implemented by the World Bank with funding support from Australia's DFAT. SARTFP supports economic growth and women's economic empowerment through trade and connectivity primarily along the eastern corridor of South Asia. Focusing on micro- and small entrepreneurs, SARTFP funds analyses and technical assistance work to improve cross-border trade and enhance activities of women-owned enterprises. The program fosters inclusive development of roads, rail, and inland waterway infrastructure that connects local communities to regional markets. It is one of several trust funds programs implemented by the World Bank to build greater regional integration and cooperation.



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