



UNSW
SYDNEY



UNSW
Institute for
Global Development

Reimagining development partnerships for women's economic security

An Indo-Pacific framework for cooperation

Sunaina Kumar, Maitri Fellow, UNSW Institute for Global Development

November 2024



Reimagining development partnerships for women's economic security: An Indo-Pacific framework for cooperation

ABSTRACT

Rising global fragility—driven by the combined challenges of climate change, conflict, and slowed economic growth—has hindered development progress, disproportionately impacting women worldwide. This brief explores how India and Australia—both committed to addressing key human security issues through regional cooperation—can strengthen their partnership by converging their development assistance in the Indo-Pacific. In doing so, they can support inclusive growth and sustainable development, advancing women's economic security in the region. The brief proposes a new framework for cooperation built on four key actions: forging new partnerships and new ways of working, fast-tracking access to finance and technology, prioritising gender data and evidence-based interventions, and cooperating on gender-intentional climate action and resilience. Together, these actions are supported by eight specific recommendations, designed to address current and emerging global challenges.

1. Introduction

Global progress in development has all but stalled in the last decade, with cascading crises that have challenged the dominant development paradigms. From the far-reaching impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic to escalating regional conflicts and the accelerating climate crisis, these challenges have exposed the limitations of established development models, increasing economic fragility and deepening global disparities. This has severely impacted developing countries, widening the income gap between emerging and advanced economies. A report by the World Bank this year calls attention to the historic reversal in development, as one-third of economies eligible for loans and grants from the Bank are poorer now than on the eve of the pandemic.¹

In a crisis-prone world, current models of development cooperation have been tested and found lacking.² New models are needed to both respond to and anticipate the growing demands of international development cooperation. With a particular focus on how India and Australia can work together to advance women's economic security in the Pacific and South Asia, this brief explores how new frameworks of cooperation can address these challenges.

1.1 The gender gap in economic security

Multiple intersecting crises disproportionately impact women, who tend to bear the brunt of economic and environmental shocks. The pace of progress on gender equality has stagnated globally, with the risk of hard-won gains being lost. Recent data by the World Economic Forum shows progress in

¹ Tommy Chrimes et al, *The Great Reversal: Prospects, Risks, and Policies in International Development Association (IDA) Countries* (World Bank Group, 2024) <<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/6161dce8-521a-4722-9746-0231865fc8d1/content>>.

² OECD, *Development Co-Operation Report 2023: Debating the Aid System* (OECD Publishing, 2023) <<https://doi.org/10.1787/f6edc3c2-en>>.

narrowing gender gaps in health and education globally, yet women's economic participation has deteriorated further. The gender gap in labour market participation has widened, and women face higher unemployment rates than men.³

Across the Asia-Pacific, female participation rates have declined over the past few decades. Women are not benefiting from job growth in new sectors as much as men.⁴ In South Asia, where women's economic participation has become a complex issue, only 1 in 4 women are in the labour market, a rate that is lower than the global average. In the Pacific, gender gaps are generally lower, with nearly 50 per cent of women in the labour force,⁵ compared to less than 30 per cent in South Asia.⁶ However, in the Pacific's largest economies, female economic participation is nearly half that of men.⁷ South Asia and the Pacific share other common trends that disproportionately affect women, including high levels of informal and vulnerable employment, gender-based occupational segregation, heavy burdens of unpaid care work, increased vulnerability from climate change, and restrictive social norms.

Expanding economic opportunities for women stimulates growth and productivity, leading to long-term economic and social benefits, including economic growth and improved health and education outcomes.⁸ By narrowing gender gaps in labour force participation, the World Bank estimates that developing countries can add up to 8 per cent to their GDP.⁹ Some of the most advanced economies in the world also have the highest female labour force participation, underlining the essential link between women's participation in work and economic development.

1.2 The Australia-India partnership

The partnership between Australia and India has never been closer and more essential than it is today, with shared interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Although India and Australia do not have a bilateral development cooperation program, there is growing potential for the two countries to work together to address the most pressing economic development issues in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁰ By prioritising development cooperation, India and Australia can deepen their relationship, promote regional growth, and capitalise on trade and investment opportunities in the region.

Gender equality and enhancing women's economic security are key development priorities for both countries. Under its G20 presidency in 2014, Australia was instrumental in advocating for women's economic empowerment through the Brisbane Goal or the '25 by 25' goal, which aims to reduce the gap between men and women's labour force participation by 25 per cent by 2025. India faces

³ World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2023* (Insight Report, June 2023) <https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf>.

⁴ International Labour Office and Asian Development Bank, *Where Women Work in Asia and the Pacific: Implications for Policies, Equity and Inclusive Growth* (2023) <<https://www.ilo.org/publications/where-women-work-asia-and-pacific-implications-policies-equity-and>>.

⁵ World Bank, 'Ratio of Female to Male Labor Force Participation Rate (%) (Modeled ILO Estimate) - Pacific Island Small States', *World Development Indicators database* ([nd]) <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FM.ZS?locations=S2>>.

⁶ Martin Raiser, 'South Asia Needs More Women in the Workforce', *World Bank Blogs* (27 November 2023) <<https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/voices/south-asia-needs-more-women-workforce>>.

⁷ Jessica Collins, *Women Are Underfunded in the Pacific Islands* (Lowy Institute, 29 August 2024) <<https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/women-are-underfunded-in-the-pacific-islands>>.

⁸ World Bank Group, 'The World Bank In Gender' ([nd]) <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/gender/overview>>.

⁹ Antoinette M Sayeh, Alejandro Badel and Rishi Goyal, 'Countries That Close Gender Gaps See Substantial Growth Returns', *IMF Blog* (27 September 2023) <<https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2023/09/27/countries-that-close-gender-gaps-see-substantial-growth-returns>>.

¹⁰ To reduce aid dependency, India introduced a policy in 2003 to not accept tied aid, which requires recipients to use funds for goods or services from the donor country. India accepts bilateral aid from only five countries, the United Kingdom, the United States, Russia, Germany and Japan, as well as the European Union. Other donor countries can channel assistance funds through non-governmental organisations, multilateral institutions and United Nations' agencies.

substantial gender equality challenges, including significant barriers to women's economic participation.

This brief explores how India and Australia can work together to advance women's economic security in the Pacific and South Asia by building new frameworks of cooperation that are responsive to current and emerging global challenges. It draws insights from secondary literature, reports, and research articles. Key stakeholders, officials, and independent researchers were also interviewed to substantiate the findings.

Following this introduction, Section 2 will provide an overview of Australia's and India's approaches to development cooperation and gender equality, with a focus on their convergence in the Indo-Pacific. Section 3 will analyse trends and barriers to women's participation in the workforce in South Asia and the Pacific. Section 4 will review relevant country or sector-specific case studies and best practices. The brief concludes with recommendations for India and Australia to cooperate to enhance women's economic opportunities in the region.

2. Australian and Indian approaches to development cooperation and women's economic empowerment

Australia and India have developed distinct approaches to development cooperation based on their unique histories and trajectories. Australia's approach has emphasised capacity building and stability in its Pacific and Southeast Asian neighbourhood. India has focused on solidarity with other developing nations, emphasising demand-driven partnerships and South-South cooperation across Asia and Africa.

2.1 Australia's approach to international development

Australian development cooperation started with aid programs in the 1950s in the Pacific, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. At that time, Papua New Guinea, then administered by Australia, and a newly independent India, were the largest recipients of development aid. Australia's development policy continues to focus heavily on the Pacific and Southeast Asia, emphasising the building of individual, community, and state capabilities to address economic and environmental threats in these regions.¹¹

A new international development policy, Australia's International Development Policy: For a Peaceful, Stable and Prosperous Indo-Pacific, was released in 2023. This document underlines Australia's strategic focus on the Indo-Pacific, a theme referenced throughout. It also highlights climate change, locally-led models of development, and gender equality as key priorities.¹²

Gender is integral to Australia's international development policy. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) is developing a new International Gender Equality Strategy to make gender equality central to Australia's foreign policy, international development, humanitarian action, trade, and security efforts. Australia has set a target of 80 per cent of all development investments to address gender equality and requires new investments of more than A\$3 million to include gender equality objectives. Australia has also committed to providing A\$65 million through the Indo-Pacific Gender Equality Fund in 2024-25.¹³

¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'A Short History of Australian Aid' (25 January 2001)

<<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/featurearticlesbytitle/A30A0205261ABEECCA2569DE00200135>>.

¹² Commonwealth of Australia, DFAT, *Australia's International Development Policy: For a Peaceful, Stable and Prosperous Indo-Pacific* (August 2023) <<https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/international-development-policy.pdf>>.

¹³ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Australia's Official Development Assistance Budget Summary 2024-25' ([Ind]) <<https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/corporate/portfolio-budget-statements/australias-official-development-assistance-budget-summary-2024-25>>.

Figure 1: Total Australian Gender Equality ODA by region, 2021-22 to 2022-23

Region	2021-22 Actual \$m*	2022-23 Actual \$m*	2022-23 Actual %
Pacific	530.9	660.2	38%
Southeast and East Asia	516.0	673.7	38%
South and West Asia	233.3	216.7	12%
Africa and the Middle East	79.4	125.4	7%
Rest of the world**	141.7	80.4	5%
Total Gender Equality ODA	1,501.4	1,756.4	100.0

*Due to rounding, discrepancies may occur between sums of the component items in totals.

**Includes ODA that is not attributable to particular countries or regions.

Source: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade¹⁴

2.2 India's international development policy

India's emergence as a significant development partner has expanded along with its economic rise. Once among the world's largest recipients of foreign aid, even into the 1980s, India became a net donor in 2015.¹⁵ India established a development cooperation program soon after independence in 1947, focusing on South Asia, Southeast Asia and Africa, with an emphasis on concessional lines of credit, capacity-building, and technical assistance.

India's approach is shaped by its struggle for independence and solidarity with other colonised and developing countries. By positioning itself as a 'development partner', it has challenged the conventional North-South discourse on development cooperation.¹⁶ As a development partner, India promotes a demand-driven model of development, which it differentiates from traditional donor-driven approaches. More recently, India has positioned itself as a 'voice' of the Global South, increasing the scale of its South-South cooperation and promoting a distinct Southern development discourse.¹⁷

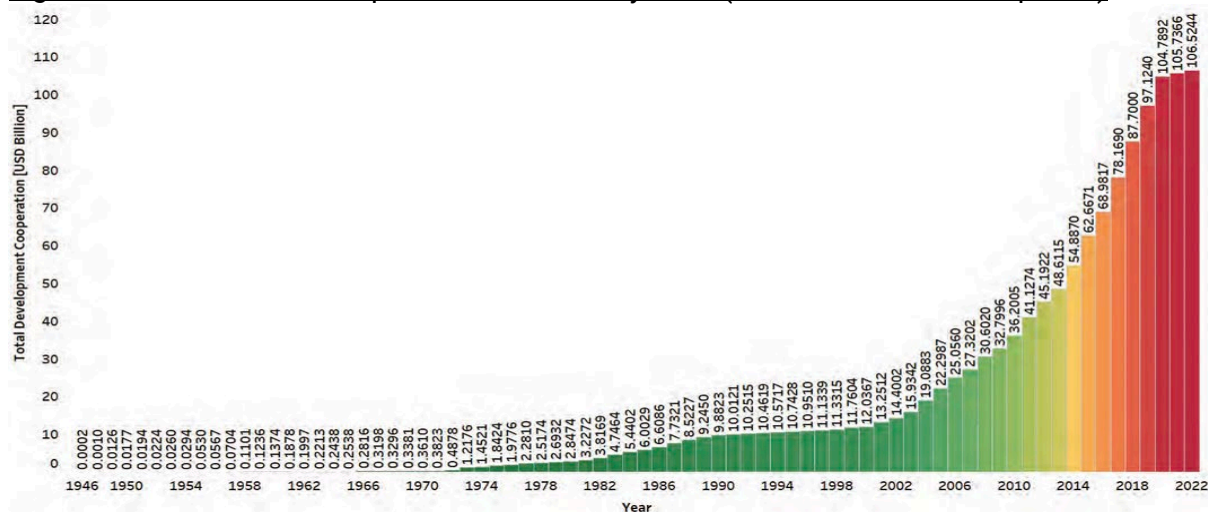
¹⁴ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Gender Equality Development Cooperation Factsheet' (May 2024) <<https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/development-cooperation-fact-sheets-for-country-regional-and-sector-thematic-programs/gender-equality>>.

¹⁵ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No 3245' (22 March 2017) <https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/28197/QUESTION_NO3245_FOREIGN_AID>.

¹⁶ Malancho Chakrabarty, *Development Cooperation Towards the SDGs: The India Model* (ORF Occasional Paper, Observer Research Foundation, 30 September 2022) <<https://www.orfonline.org/research/development-cooperation-towards-the-sdgs-the-india-model>>.

¹⁷ Sachin Chaturvedi and Anthea Mulakala (eds), *India's Approach to Development Cooperation* (Routledge, 2016).

Figure 2: Cumulative Development Assistance by India (US \$ billion at current prices)



* Values for 2021-22 and 2022-23 are estimated budget figures.

Source: Estimation based on DevCoopIndia, 202218

Unlike Australia, India does not have a public policy document outlining its approach to development cooperation or the place of gender within it. However, the Union Government has acknowledged the need for a more 'gender-balanced foreign policy,' increasingly reflected through gender mainstreaming in its international capacity-building and knowledge-sharing initiatives in South Asia and Africa.¹⁹ India advocated for 'women-led development' during its G20 presidency in 2023, promoting the idea that women should set development agendas as equal participants and leaders.²⁰

Similar to Australia, which focuses its development support in its Pacific neighbourhood, India's development partnerships have been concentrated in its neighbouring countries in South Asia.

2.3 Growing coordination between Australia and India

As Comprehensive Strategic Partners and key allies in the Indo-Pacific, India and Australia are committed to addressing key human security issues through regional cooperation. The growing alignment of their interests in the Indo-Pacific provides a foundation for enhanced collaboration, particularly in areas such as economic security, climate resilience, and gender equality.

Indeed, faced with increasing geopolitical and economic competition, Australia and India have stepped up their engagement in each other's neighbourhoods—South Asia and the Pacific, respectively—with high-level visits and expanded development cooperation programs. These developments create increasing potential for the two countries to converge their efforts in promoting women's economic security in South Asia and the Pacific.

¹⁸ Research and Information System for Developing Countries, *75 Years of Development Partnership: Saga of Commitment to Plurality, Diversity and Collective Progress* (2022) <https://www.ris.org.in/sites/default/files/Publication/Indian_Development_Cooperation-75%20yrs-NEW-PRINT-11-APRIL-2022-Web-1.pdf>.

¹⁹ Akanksha Khullar, 'Work in Progress: India's March Towards a Feminist Foreign Policy', *Australian Institute of International Affairs: Australian Outlook* (26 June 2024) <<https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/work-in-progress-indias-march-towards-a-feminist-foreign-policy/>>.

²⁰ G20 India, *India's G20 Presidency: A Synopsis* (2023) <https://www.g20.in/content/dam/gtwenty/Indias_G20_Presidency-A_Synopsis.pdf>.

3. Key issues and challenges to women's economic participation in select countries in South Asia and the Pacific

Despite the diversity in women's economic participation across both regions, reflecting economic and cultural differences, common trends persist. These trends include low labour force participation, high rates of informal employment, unequal distribution of unpaid care work, limited access to skills training, and gender-based violence. The following highlights these trends in detail:

- i. **In the Pacific, women's labour force participation is lower than men's**, with stark variations between states, such as 39.1 per cent in Fiji, 41.4 per cent in Samoa, and 82.7 per cent in the Solomon Islands. In South Asia, women's labour force participation is among the lowest in the world, at 32.7 per cent in India, 32.1 per cent in Sri Lanka, and 37 per cent in Bangladesh.²¹
- ii. **In both regions, women predominantly comprise the informal economy workforce**, largely engaged in subsistence agriculture, as family workers or own-account workers, with low incomes and lacking social protection. In Papua New Guinea, for instance, 67 per cent of women rely on subsistence farming.²² In Nepal, 80 per cent of working women are engaged in subsistence farming.²³
- iii. **There is an unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work** between men and women, restricting the time available to women for paid work. In Fiji, women spend approximately three times as much time on unpaid domestic and care work as men.²⁴ Women in India spend eight times more hours on care work than men, the highest globally.²⁵
- iv. **Gendered norms lead to women having unequal access to skills-based training**. In the Pacific, the skills shortage is compounded by the lack of vocational training infrastructure in the region and the migration of skilled workers to Australia and New Zealand, with women taking up work in service sectors such as care work and hospitality.²⁶ In South Asia, despite the evidence—a study in Nepal found 390 hours of vocational skills training increased female labour force participation rates by 13 percentage points²⁷—the participation of women in such training programs remains low.
- v. **Women-owned businesses in both regions are largely solely owned enterprises**, concentrated in sectors, such as agriculture, retail, hospitality, and handicrafts. Female entrepreneurs lack access to markets, finance, and information. Women own only 19 per cent of formally registered businesses in

²¹ World Bank Group, 'Labor Force Participation Rate (% of Population)', *Gender Data Portal* <<https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/sl-tlf-acti-zs>>.

²² Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, *Country Gender Assessment of Agriculture and the Rural Sector in Papua New Guinea* (2019) <<https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/ca6308en>>.

²³ Bipina Sharma Basnet et al, *Women's Non-Farm Employment in Nepal: A Landscape Review of Organizations and Interventions* (Australian AID and World Bank Group, 21 January 2021) <<https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/880741611555598446/women-s-non-farm-employment-in-nepal-a-landscape-review-of-organizations-and-interventions>>.

²⁴ Asian Development Bank, *Women's Economic Empowerment in the Pacific Region: A Comprehensive Analysis of Existing Research and Data* (May 2023) <<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/884486/women-economic-empowerment-pacific-region.pdf>>.

²⁵ Think 20 India and Observer Research Foundation, *Leveraging Care Economy Investments to Unlock Economic Development and Foster Women's Economic Empowerment in G20 Economies* (2023) <https://www.global-solutions-initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/T20_PB_TF6_87_Leveraging_Care_Economy_Investments_to_Unlock_Economic_Development_and_Foster_Womens_Economic_Empowerment_in_G20_Economies.pdf>.

²⁶ Ellen Boccuzzi, *The Future of Work for Women in the Pacific Islands* (The Asia Foundation, 2021) <<https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-Future-of-Work-for-Women-in-the-Pacific-Islands.updateMarch1.pdf>>.

²⁷ Veronica Del Motto and Serenat Kivilcim, 'Can Skills and Training Interventions Improve Labor Market Outcomes for Women in South Asia?', *Collaboration for Development* (22 January 2022) <https://collaboration.worldbank.org/content/sites/collaboration-for-development/en/groups/weesa-innovate-to-empower/blogs.entry.html/2022/01/21/can_skills_and_traininginterventionsimprovelabo-mrPQ.html>.

Fiji.²⁸ In South Asia, women face discrimination when accessing credit for small and medium enterprises.²⁹

- vi. **Women in the Pacific have limited access to digital technology** due to lower incomes and prevailing social norms, despite the proven benefits of technology in improving women's economic empowerment.³⁰ Similarly, in South Asia, which has high levels of technology adoption, women are 70 per cent less likely to own a smartphone.³¹
- vii. **Women's economic security is further threatened by climate change** and extreme weather events in the Pacific and South Asia.³² Women's livelihoods in these regions depend largely on agriculture, fisheries, and tourism, which are significantly affected by the impacts of climate change.
- viii. **Women's concerns over personal safety and the threat of gender-based violence, as well as the lack of affordable and inclusive public transport systems, are common to both regions.** These issues restrict their mobility and economic opportunities. The intersection between women's economic security and gender-based violence is a critical and emerging area of study in both regions.³³

4. Australian and Indian initiatives to advance women's economic empowerment

Impactful and innovative country- or sector-specific initiatives, supported by Australia and India, have enhanced women's economic participation in South and Southeast Asia and the Pacific. These programs and initiatives offer valuable lessons for future efforts. Through increased collaboration, India and Australia can leverage their respective experience and expertise to support and scale these initiatives—and similar efforts—to further women's economic empowerment in both South Asia and the Pacific.

4.1 Technology and innovation for social inclusion: India's experience with digital public infrastructure

India has leveraged digital public infrastructure (DPI), built on a public-private partnership model, to integrate individual identification systems with mobile technology. This integration allows people, particularly those previously excluded from the formal financial system to access banking services and government benefits. A gender-focused approach to DPI policymaking has enabled the government to extend social protection and enhance women's financial inclusion.³⁴ Through the creation of an inclusive DPI framework, India has fast-tracked financial inclusion by four decades.

India is now partnering with other developing countries, including Sri Lanka and Papua New Guinea, to support their efforts in building DPI. Given the significant impact that DPI can have on gender equality, Australia should consider collaborating with India to promote DPI in the Pacific.

²⁸ Kaleah Salmon, 'Empowering Women Entrepreneurs in Fiji through Fintech', *Business Partnerships Platform* (9 October 2023) <<https://thebpp.com.au/partner-news/empowering-women-entrepreneurs-in-fiji-through-fintech/>>.

²⁹ Nirosha Wellalage and Stuart Locke, 'Access to Credit by SMEs in South Asia: Do Women Entrepreneurs Face Discrimination' (2017) 41 *Research in International Business and Finance* 336.

³⁰ Ingrid FitzGerald and Aleta Moriarty, 'For the Pacific to Prosper, More Women Need to Benefit from Technology', *Asian Development Blog* (8 March 2023) <<https://blogs.adb.org/blog/pacific-prosper-more-women-need-benefit-technology>>.

³¹ Asian Development Bank, 'Accelerating Digital Inclusion for Women and Girls in Asia and the Pacific' (6 March 2023) <<https://www.adb.org/news/infographics/accelerating-digital-inclusion-women-girls-asia-pacific>>.

³² Asian Development Bank (n 24); International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, *State of Gender Equality and Climate Change in South Asia and Hindu Kush Himalaya Report* (2022) <<https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/11/state-of-gender-equality-and-climate-change-in-south-asia-and-hindu-kush-himalaya-report>>.

³³ United Nations Population Fund and CARE, *Linking Women's Economic Empowerment, Eliminating Gender-Based Violence and Enabling Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights* (Working Paper, November 2020) <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/201202_unfpa-care_linking-womens-economic-empowerment-final.pdf>.

³⁴ G20 Global Partnership for Financial Inclusion, *G20 Policy Recommendations for Advancing Financial Inclusion and Productivity Gains Through Digital Public Infrastructure* (2023) <<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099092023121016458/pdf/P178703046f82d07c0bbc60b5e474ea7841.pdf>>.

4.2 Building local capacity: Australia prioritises the Pacific point of view

Markets for Change, a project by the Australian government, focuses on improving the safety and livelihoods of women market vendors in the Pacific region, who work long hours under harsh conditions. This multi-country project makes markets safer and more responsive to the needs of women by providing roofing, secure accommodation for rural market vendors, toilets, and clean drinking water. These improvements reduce the risk of sexual and physical violence against women and strengthen their livelihoods.³⁵ The project stands out as demand-driven and cost-effective and is readily adaptable for South Asia.

Building on the lessons from Australia's programs in the Pacific, the Australian government launched *Pacific Women Lead*, which partners with regional organisations to promote locally led solutions to women's economic empowerment. The program integrates women's economic empowerment into other priority areas like climate change, agriculture, fisheries, coastal management, and migration.³⁶

4.3 Engaging the private sector: Australian initiatives in Southeast Asia

Investing in Women is an Australian-funded project designed to accelerate women's economic opportunities in the formal sector and for small- to medium-sized business owners by engaging with the private sector, business leaders, capital providers, and policymakers. The program promotes gender lens investing, bridges financing gaps for women entrepreneurs, and promotes workplace gender equality.³⁷ The program can be adapted to South Asian countries which are seeing economic growth in the private sector.

4.4 Leveraging development through civil society: Local-led development from India

The *Lighting a Billion Lives* program, led by The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), a civil society organisation from India, involves women in last-mile energy service delivery models, such as solar lanterns. This program has been implemented in countries in South Asia and Africa and taps into the strength of non-state actors like civil society organisations to promote innovative development models.³⁸

4.5 Small scale, high impact: South-South cooperation in India's projects in the Pacific

The *Scaling Climate and Disaster Risk Financing Framework and Parametric Insurance in Fiji* project falls under the India-UN Development Partnership Fund which supports sustainable development projects in least-developed countries (LDCs) and small island developing states (SIDS). Drawing on India's expertise in financial technology, the project enables women from disaster-prone areas to enrol in parametric micro-insurance for disaster relief.³⁹ Australia could partner with India to expand the program, which builds on climate resilience and the economic security of women. Similarly, in the

³⁵ UN Women Australia, 'Markets for Change' (14 January 2020) <<https://unwomen.org.au/markets-for-change/>>.

³⁶ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Pacific Women Lead Design Framework', *Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade* (July 2021) <<https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/development/pacific-women-lead-design-framework>>.

³⁷ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Investing in Women Initiative: Fact Sheet', *Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade* (19 July 2018) <<https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Pages/investing-in-women-initiative-fact-sheet>>.

³⁸ Arun Sreekumar et al, *Lighting a Billion Lives: Developing Pathways for Energy Access* (The Energy and Resources Institute, 2016) <https://labl.teriin.org/files/LaBL_publication/files/downloads/LaBL_Publication.pdf>.

³⁹ United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation, 'Advancing Women's Empowerment through South-South Cooperation' (8 March 2024) <<https://unsouthsouth.org/2024/03/08/advancing-womens-empowerment-through-south-south-cooperation/>>.

Federal States of Micronesia, a project under the same fund aims to strengthen income generation among women by increasing their involvement in livelihood activities related to water and sanitation.

The *Rocket Stove* project aims to empower rural women in Fiji and improve their livelihoods through the provision of rocket stoves under the India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) Fund. These stoves improve efficiency for women by shortening cooking time and reducing smoke from open-fire cooking.⁴⁰ The IBSA Fund also works with women who are smallholder farmers in the coconut sector in Kiribati to improve their livelihoods by identifying market linkages and value-adding opportunities.

4.6 Widening the scope through climate and resilience: Australia's engagement in South Asia

Gender is a crucial element of the *South Asian Regional Infrastructure Connectivity* (SARIC) program, a regional trade facilitation program in South Asia, that aims to enhance employment opportunities for women across Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal. This is achieved by developing local enterprises, supporting cross-border trade, and improving the quality of business and entrepreneurship training for women.⁴¹

The *South Asia Water Security Initiative* (SAWASI) aims to strengthen climate and disaster resilience through better management of available water resources in cities in South Asian cities, with a focus on women and girls. This project could be expanded in both regions through Australia-India cooperation.⁴²

5. Policy Recommendations

As current models of development cooperation are debated with the growing global challenges, new frameworks of cooperation are required to both address and proactively anticipate the increasing demands of international development cooperation.

To ensure that development cooperation is fit for purpose in these times, the *Development Cooperation Report 2023* by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) suggests that countries support locally led transformation in partner countries, modernise business models and financial management practices, and rebalance power relations in international decision making and partnerships.⁴³

Building on these insights, this brief proposes a new framework for India and Australia to advance women's economic security in the Pacific and South Asia. It outlines four key actions, supported by eight specific recommendations, designed to address both immediate and long-term challenges in development cooperation. These actions and recommendations aim to create a more inclusive, sustainable, and gender-responsive approach to international development.

⁴⁰ Bakhodir Burkhanov, 'Empowering Rural Women in Fiji – Upscaling the Rocket Stove Project Launch', *United Nations Development Programme Pacific Office* (14 September 2018) <<https://www.undp.org/pacific/speeches/empowering-rural-women-fiji-upscaling-rocket-stove-project-launch>>. Bakhodir Burkhanov, 'Empowering Rural Women in Fiji – Upscaling the Rocket Stove Project Launch', *United Nations Development Programme Pacific Office* (14 September 2018) <<https://www.undp.org/pacific/speeches/empowering-rural-women-fiji-upscaling-rocket-stove-project-launch>>.

⁴¹ South Asia Regional Infrastructure Connectivity, 'South Asia Regional Infrastructure Connectivity: Building Capacities Across South Asia' ([nd]) <<https://www.sarictns.org/>>.

⁴² Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'South Asia Regional Program' ([nd]) <<https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/south-and-central-asia/development-assistance/australias-regional-partnership-south-asia/south-asia-regional-program>>.

⁴³ OECD (n 2).

Action 1: Forge new partnerships and new ways of working

Building innovative partnerships through South-South and triangular cooperation is crucial for addressing global development challenges. By integrating local communities, civil society, and regional institutions, these partnerships can tackle barriers like limited access to finance and technology, leveraging resources from the Global South with support from the Global North.

i. *Employ South-South and triangular cooperation (SSTC) frameworks to promote gender equality in South Asia and the Pacific*

By promoting the exchange of knowledge, expertise, and resources among countries of the global south in partnership with countries from the Global North, South-South and triangular cooperation has emerged as a transformative framework for evolving development challenges. Triangular cooperation involves collaboration between countries of the Global South and development partners from the Global North. This model facilitates the sharing of expertise, technology, and resources, enabling countries from the Global South to benefit from the experience and support of their northern counterparts. India, as an advocate for South-South cooperation, is increasingly engaged in triangular partnerships with countries like the United States, Japan, Germany and the United Kingdom, on projects in Africa. India and Australia can leverage SSTC frameworks in the Pacific and South Asia to advance women's economic empowerment.

ii. *Promote community-determined development initiatives*

The Australian government has committed to embedding locally-led development in its international development programs.⁴⁴ India has long championed locally-led development solutions, like the *Solar Mamas* program, which operates in 93 countries and is led by a civil society organisation that trains rural women to become solar engineers in remote areas.⁴⁵ The experience of South Asian countries like India and Bangladesh in building women's self-help groups and promoting collective action for women's economic empowerment can be effective in Pacific islands with larger populations. India and Australia can initiate projects in South Asia and the Pacific, ensuring greater involvement of civil society organisations and women's groups.

iii. *Prioritise women's economic empowerment through multilateral engagement*

Australia and India are active members of several regional and multilateral groupings, where they have collaborated on women's economic empowerment. Notably, they co-sponsored the IORA Ministerial Declaration on Gender Equality and Women's Economic Empowerment through the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Beyond IORA, several other platforms offer opportunities for potential collaboration. India is reviving the Forum for India-Pacific Island Cooperation (FIPIC), which presents a valuable space to promote gender equality development partnerships alongside Pacific regional institutions. Additionally, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue—already focused on health and climate security in the Indo-Pacific—should consider prioritising women's economic empowerment in its agenda.

⁴⁴ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *DFAT Guidance Note: Locally Led Development* ([Ind]) <<https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/dfat-guidance-note-locally-led-development.pdf>>.

⁴⁵ 'Solar', *Barefoot College International* ([Ind]) <<https://www.barefootcollege.org/solution/solar/>>.

Action 2: Fast-track access to finance and technology

Accelerating access to finance and technology, through models like blended finance and impact investing, is essential for women's economic empowerment. Strengthening digital infrastructure and promoting financial inclusion can enable women entrepreneurs and workers in vulnerable sectors to thrive.

iv. *Increase public and private financing for women's economic empowerment*

The current fragile geopolitical environment and the climate threat have depleted the financing available for gender-related development. OECD data shows that the share of bilateral development finance with gender equality as a policy objective has decreased from 45 per cent in 2019-2020 to 43 per cent in 2021-2022, of which only 8 per cent was contributed by private philanthropy.⁴⁶ This reduction has occurred alongside a broader decline in global development finance since the Covid-19 pandemic. Both India and Australia should consider increasing their investment in gender equality, with a specific focus on women's economic empowerment. Both countries should also prioritise mobilising private finance to support gender-focused initiatives.

v. *Leverage technological cooperation as an opportunity*

India and Australia are strengthening bilateral technology cooperation and, in 2020, established a Cyber and Critical Technology Partnership. By combining the strengths of Australia's research and development with India's experience of scalable frugal innovation through digital public infrastructure, the two countries can collaborate to enhance women's financial inclusion through technological cooperation.

Action 3: Prioritise gender data and evidence-based interventions

Improving gender-disaggregated data collection in areas like finance, health, and education is vital for designing effective programs. Investing in gender research and establishing robust monitoring frameworks ensures that interventions are responsive to women's needs and track progress toward gender equality.

vi. *Enhance the availability of gender data*

The lack of gender-disaggregated data affects even the most ambitious initiatives. A study on gender data gaps in countries in Asia and the Pacific found that 53 per cent of gender-relevant indicators were missing from international data sets.⁴⁷ To address this, the Australian government recently launched the Pacific Gender Statistics Dashboard, which aims to improve access to gender data in the Pacific.⁴⁸ India and Australia should jointly prioritise and support a program to close significant gender data gaps in both the Pacific and South Asia by dedicating resources and funding to enhance data collection and analysis.

Action 4: Cooperate on gender-intentional climate action and resilience

⁴⁶ OECD, 'Development Finance for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment' (7 March 2024) <<https://web-archive.oecd.org/temp/2024-03-07/73550-development-finance-for-gender-equality-and-women-s-empowerment.htm>>.

⁴⁷ Open Data Watch, Data2X and United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, *Bridging Gender Data Gaps in Asia and the Pacific: Technical Report* (April 2021) <<https://opendatawatch.com/publications/bridging-gender-data-gaps-in-asia-and-the-pacific-technical-report/>>.

⁴⁸ The Pacific Community (SPC), 'Pacific Gender Statistics Dashboard to Enhance Availability of Gender Statistics and Promote Equality' (5 October 2023) <<https://www.spc.int/updates/news/media-release/2023/10/pacific-gender-statistics-dashboard-to-enhance-availability-of>>.

Integrating gender considerations into climate adaptation and disaster resilience is essential for addressing emerging threats like climate change and disasters. Existing international frameworks can be leveraged to ensure gender-responsive solutions that reduce economic vulnerabilities and promote women's resilience in regions like the Pacific and South Asia.

vii. Collaborate on building gender-intentional climate action and disaster resilience

Women are disproportionately vulnerable at the intersection of economic and climate security.⁴⁹ The Pacific and South Asia face an existential threat from climate change and disasters, with women's livelihoods in these regions relying on sectors most affected by climate change. India and Australia can work towards ensuring that women's livelihoods are resilient to climate change in least-developed countries and small island developing states. This can be achieved through enhanced cooperation, increased financing, and multilateral action. One such initiative is the India-led Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, which can be leveraged to support gender-inclusive, climate-resilient projects.

viii. Cooperate on existing international frameworks

Australia has long championed the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, a framework under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, in the Pacific and in Southeast Asia.⁵⁰ The WPS agenda has evolved to include women's participation and leadership in governance and sustainable development. It also addresses emerging threats such as climate change, natural disasters, regional conflict, inequalities exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and gender-based violence. While India supports the WPS agenda, it does not have a National Action Plan for it. South Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh are increasingly promoting WPS through national action plans. This presents an opportunity for Australia and India to increase their commitment and resources to advance WPS and address economic inequities in the region.

6. Conclusion

Global fragility, exacerbated by the combined challenges of gender equality intersecting with climate, conflict, and slowed economic growth, has increased the economic vulnerability of women. By advancing women's economic rights in the Pacific and South Asia, India and Australia can strengthen their partnership—both with each other and with their neighbours—to promote sustainable development and drive inclusive growth in these regions. The commitment of both countries to a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific can only be achieved by placing gender equality at the heart of all initiatives.

The proposed framework, comprising its four key actions and policy recommendations, addresses critical barriers to women's economic security, including access to finance and technology, climate risks, and the absence of gender data. It outlines concrete steps for India and Australia to deepen their economic cooperation and reaffirm their commitments to gender equality. By leveraging their combined strengths, both countries can serve as leaders in the region, enhancing women's economic participation and ensuring long-term resilience and prosperity.

⁴⁹ United Nations, 'Five Ways the Climate Crisis Impacts Human Security' ([Ind]) <<https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/climate-issues/human-security>>.

⁵⁰ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Australia's International Support for Gender Equality', *Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade* ([Ind]) <<https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/themes/gender-equality/Australias-international-support-for-gender-equality>>.

Acknowledgements

This research paper is supported by the [Centre for Australia-India Relations](#) (CAIR) via a 2024 Maitri Fellowship grant. UNSW Institute for Global Development is proud to be a CAIR grant recipient.

The author would like to thank all the experts and reviewers who have contributed to the report with their valuable insights and constructive feedback.

Any views or opinions expressed in this report belong to the author.

Sunaina Kumar is Maitri Fellow 2024 at the Institute for Global Development at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. She also works as Senior Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi where she focuses on gender and development.



UNSW
SYDNEY