

Progress on Women's Economic Empowerment in Mongolia

By Tsolmontuya Altankhundaga

Tsolmontuya Altankhundaga, Project Manager of The Asia Foundation Mongolia's women's economic empowerment programs, explains that "In Mongolia, significant strides have been made in advancing the status of women in various sectors of the economy as well as in government and civil society more broadly."

Women's economic empowerment is fundamental to achieving gender equality and fostering sustainable development. In Mongolia, significant strides have been made in advancing the status of women in various sectors of the economy as well as in government and civil society more broadly. The Asia Foundation's [Women's Economic Empowerment project](#) is an example of a policy initiative that has facilitated this progress. These projects support women's organizations to work on a range of economic empowerment issues while building capacity and multi-stakeholder coalitions to pursue changes that create an environment in which women can fully participate in Mongolia's economy. Some of these prospective policy reforms significantly enhance efforts to advance gender equality in Mongolia.

Traditionally, Mongolian society was characterized by nomadic pastoralism, where gender roles were defined by the division of labor in households. The socialist period between 1924 and 1990 introduced policies promoting gender equality, such as equal access to education and employment opportunities for both men and women. However, the transition to a market-oriented economy in the 1990s brought forth new challenges for women, including a high level of gender-based violence, increased poverty levels, income inequality, and insufficient childcare infrastructure. [Consequences from some of these challenges persist](#) today, increasing the "double burden" that constrains women's labor market participation and affects their perceived ability to undertake high-skilled jobs. According to Mongolia's National Statistical Office, working women spend approximately three times more on caregiving duties and household chores than working men, accounting for 75.9% of non-paid work in family-owned businesses. National statistics also demonstrate that Mongolian women are less likely to be active in the labor market and earn less than men on average despite having higher educational attainment than men.

Women-led micro and small businesses play a key role in addressing gender-based economic disparities in Mongolia. These business ventures contribute to women's active engagement in the economy and empower the social status of women in Mongolian society. Sustained advocacy for local civil society organizations (CSO), nongovernmental organizations, grassroots women's activism groups, and the younger generations of the women's rights movement has had an outsized influence on the creation and implementation of policies needed for micro and small women-led businesses to flourish in Mongolia. The progress these groups have made in advancing women's economic empowerment is evidenced in the initiatives and accomplishments listed below:

Active advocacy engagements of civil society organizations in women's economic empowerment: Women's [CSOs formed in the early 1990s stood at the forefront of democratic reforms and promoted women's political, social, and economic participation](#). The Mongolian Feminist Network, known as MONFEMNET NGO, is a notable CSO for promoting gender equality in Mongolia. It is open to any civil society organization committed to gender justice, human rights, freedom, and democracy. In 2023, MONFEMNET added women's economic empowerment to their core activities as a strategic pathway, highlighting a significant milestone in Mongolia. MONFEMNET, using a blueprint it developed to actively engage women from diverse backgrounds, established the first CSO core group in Mongolia's women's economic rights movement. This effort increased the number of CSOs conducting women's economic empowerment programming from three in 2020 to seventeen by 2023. Collectively, these CSOs have identified four key issues as a bottleneck to women's economic empowerment in

Mongolia: 1) increase enabling environment for micro and small businesses; 2) support a better infrastructure for supporting women's labor force participation and decrease unpaid care work; 3) eliminate labor exploitation and discrimination in the workplace; 4) challenge gender stereotypes.

National mechanism and recent progress on approval of major policy documents: The Constitution of Mongolia guarantees equal rights for all citizens, and the country has ratified international conventions to protect women's rights. In 2018, the National Committee on Gender Equality (NCGE), which was under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, was re-established as an independent entity chaired by the Prime Minister. This shift enabled more independent decision-making for NCGE, which better ensured equal participation of the public and the government in implementing gender equality policies across all sectors and the sustainability of these endeavors.

Several documents form the blueprint for advancing and sustaining women's economic empowerment in Mongolia over the course of the next decade. Upon the completion of Mongolia's 2017-2021 National Action Plan to Promote Gender Equality, the Cross-sectoral Strategic plan for promoting gender equality in Mongolia 2022-2031 was developed in accordance with the Law on Promotion of Gender Equality. According to the [Gender Gap Index 2022](#), Mongolia still scored lower for political empowerment, economic participation, and opportunities for women, ranking 70th out of 146 countries. The National Strategic Plan 2022-2031 seeks to address these shortfalls with the inclusion of a goal to support equal opportunity and participation in the economy. This goal enables NCGE to give greater priority to women's economic empowerment by leveraging this new national mechanism.

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Another major advancement was the approval of Mongolia's 2022-2031 Gender-Sensitive Workplace Policy. The policy established a mechanism within the National Tripartite Committee on Labor and Social Consensus (NTCLSC), Mongolia's highest policymaking body on labor, employment relations, and social issues. The mechanism creates a more conducive legislative environment for promoting gender-sensitive workplace culture, prohibiting workplace violence and discrimination, and ensuring equal opportunities for men and women in accordance with the amended 2022 Labor Law of Mongolia. This step also aligns with the push to involve the private sector in the National Strategic Plan objectives.

Similarly, in 2023 the parliament approved the "Law on Enhancing the Economic Participation of Women Entrepreneurs" for further development by the Standing Committee on Social Policy. If implemented, the law will provide a legal definition for women entrepreneurs. This development would be a crucial step for Mongolia as a legal definition for "women-owned businesses" or "women-led businesses" does not currently exist.

The ongoing efforts of Mongolian CSOs have contributed enormously to developing national mechanisms and policy initiatives on women's economic empowerment. Along with the elevation of the NCGE, these new developments are poised to better coordinate collaboration between government, CSO, and international development organizations and promote a more holistic, impactful, and sustainable approach to women's economic empowerment. It is evident the maturation of this progress will take time, but this process presents an opportunity for international development organizations to act as a bridge between CSOs and national mechanisms and support the active participation of all stakeholders in women's economic empowerment.

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