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## Anti-women bias costs Asia \$80 billion a year: U.N.

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BANGKOK (Reuters) - Discrimination against women by restricting access to schools, hospitals and jobs is costing Asia-Pacific countries nearly \$80 billion a year, the United Nations said on Wednesday.

"The Asia-Pacific region has made good progress in reducing gender discrimination in recent years, but appalling disparities remain," the U.N. Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) said in its annual survey.

Rather than being an issue purely of human rights, the exclusion of women from the workplace was imposing a direct economic cost on countries, it said.

If India, for example, raised the proportion of working women to levels comparable to the United States, it would boost annual gross domestic product by more than one percent, or \$19 billion, the report said.

Malaysia and Indonesia -- both predominantly Muslim countries -- could also reap substantial economic benefits by getting more women into the workforce, it added.

The effect in China, however, would be more muted as the proportion of women workers was already considerably higher than elsewhere in the region.

Girls in many countries also found it harder to get an education, with female enrolment rates at primary schools in some countries as much as 26 percent lower than males, the report said.

The Bangkok-based body said one of the main reasons depriving women of the opportunities available to men was their relative lack of political representation.

"They do not have a voice in decision-making at home or in society, even when the matters are directly related to themselves," the report said. "They are powerless intellectually, materially and politically."

Only seven countries in the region had parliaments in which more than 20 percent of representatives were women, the report noted. New Zealand came in top with 28 percent.

To rectify the situation, UNESCAP put forward four practical suggestions which it said could achieve gender balance "at minimum of effort and cost provided there is political commitment at the highest level":

- \* Free primary education, close to villages and with scholarships and toilet facilities for girls
- \* Adult education classes for women
- \* Introducing laws guaranteeing the rights of women to the same basic health care as men
- \* Providing free midday meals for schoolchildren and special "nutritional packages" for pregnant mothers.

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