BRIDGING THE GAP: Advancing Equal Opportunities and Gender Equality in
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ACCEC ..................................... ASEAN Coordinating Committee on Electronic Commerce
ACW .......................................................... ASEAN Committee on Women
ADGMIN ........................................................ ASEAN Digital Ministers’ Meeting
AI ........................................................................................................ Artificial intelligence
AMMW ........................................................ ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Women
AMS ...................................................................................... ASEAN Member States
ANDE ........................................................... Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs
ASEAN ........................................................................... Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEAN-WISE Fellowship ........ ASEAN Women Impacting Social Enterprise Fellowship
ATCF ............................................................. Asian Trade Centre Foundation
AWEF ............................................................ Advancing Women’s Empowerment Fund
AWIF ............................................................................ Asia Women Impact Fund
GDP ................................................................. Gross Domestic Product
IFC ........................................................................ International Finance Corporation
IGNITE (Project) ........ ASEAN-USAID Inclusive Growth in ASEAN through Innovation, Trade, and e-Commerce
IIX ............................................................ Impact Investment Exchange
IPO ........................................................................... Initial Public Offering
ITC ........................................................................ International Trade Commission
LARCs ............................................................ Long-Acting Reversible Contraceptives
MSMEs .......................................................... Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises
SMBs ................................................................. Small and Micro Businesses
SMEs ................................................................. Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises
USABC or The Council .................................................. US-ASEAN Business Council
USAID .......................................................... United States Agency for International Development
FOREWORD

The ASEAN region, comprised of the ten nations of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, faces an unprecedented moment of opportunity and challenge. Over the past decade, consistent economic growth in ASEAN has made it the third fastest growing Indo-Pacific economy, behind China and India, with a combined GDP of US$3.2 trillion, and the fifth largest economy in the world. The region is expected to grow to be the fourth largest economy in the world within the decade, and boasts the third largest labor force in the world (after China and India). With a soaring population of more than 660 million, ASEAN nations claim more female representation than the entire population of the United States. Nearly 60% of those living in ASEAN today are under 35 years old and an astonishing 70% of the population are expected to live in urban centers by 2030 – a migration that will undoubtedly create infrastructure challenges, but also likely paves the way for small and medium sized businesses to flourish.

While this dynamic growth will create significant opportunities for the people of ASEAN, women across the region face unique challenges in accessing and benefiting from these opportunities. By most metrics, conditions for women in the workforce, and women’s labor force participation, have both improved over the past decade, but there is significant room for improvement and for ASEAN economies to grow as a result. According to a 2018 report by the McKinsey Global Institute, eliminating gender inequality in ASEAN could add nearly $370 billion to the regional economy by 2025 - equivalent to the annual GDP of Singapore. The results could be stunning.

Extending equal opportunities to women drives long-term success for families as well. Women in ASEAN are often responsible for managing the continued education for their children, ensuring proper food and nutrition for their family, and managing family finances and family businesses. When women have equal access to education and finance, families are better prepared to provide stronger educational opportunities for their children, reduce nutritional deficiencies, build wealth, and avoid long term debt. This too spells great opportunity for the region.

We hope readers will take away from this paper those key areas in which adjustments can, and should, be made. Together we can lift up millions, and in so doing, create a stronger community and an even greater future.

Bernard Baskin
Senior Director
US-ASEAN Business Council
On behalf of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), I am proud to join our colleagues in releasing this *Bridging the Gap: Advancing Equal Opportunities and Gender Equality in ASEAN* paper. This joint effort across the U.S. government, the development community, and the private sector reflects our collective commitment to a vision not merely of international development but one of inclusive development. This paper comes at an opportune moment to promote a focus on gender equality and women's economic empowerment as a means to build the resilience and growth of individuals, communities, nations, and the region.

I want to express our thanks particularly to the US-ASEAN Business Council for proactively spearheading the efforts leading to this paper, which highlights some of the important work USAID does to further the shared goals of the U.S.-ASEAN Strategic Partnership. USABC’s Sustainability Committee quickly identified gender equality and women’s economic empowerment as a priority focus area, which is also a strategic priority area for USAID.

Through analysis and real-world case studies, this paper provides grounding for our work on gender equality towards our goal of a more resilient, inclusive, and secure Southeast Asia. Case studies focused on private sector efforts demonstrate effective approaches to promoting gender equality. In line with this and backed by our recent Private Sector Landscape Assessment, which showed gender and inclusion as promising partnership areas, USAID seeks to continue to build our collaboration with the private sector on gender equality and women’s empowerment.

USAID integrates gender equality and women’s empowerment across the breadth of our development and policy engagements around the world. In fact, this paper’s release is especially timely as it overlaps with the recently released National Strategy for Gender Equity and Equality, the United States’ first-ever national gender strategy to advance the full participation of all people – including all women and girls, and those who experience intersecting and compounding forms of discrimination and bias – in the United States and around the world. If implemented, this paper’s policy recommendations will directly contribute to one of the Strategy’s key priorities of improving women’s economic security and accelerating economic growth. They will also advance ASEAN priorities on gender equality and women’s empowerment as identified in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework, and the joint U.S.-ASEAN Strategic Partnership Plan of Action 2021-2025.

USAID is proud of our programming in women’s economic empowerment that brings these policies to life in communities across Asia. For example, through our ASEAN partnership, we’ve helped launch the ASEAN Women Entrepreneurs’ Network (AWEN), promoted women’s participation in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields through an ASEAN Women in STEM Webinar Series, and supported the Underwriters Laboratories-ASEAN-U.S. Science Prize for Women since 2014. In addition, USAID supported ASEAN to develop an ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework that will help establish an institutional platform to coordinate gender mainstreaming efforts.
across ASEAN key communities. This Framework will provide a platform for collaborative and targeted action to ensure joint goals on gender equality and gender integration are achieved.

We look forward to continuing our relationship with USABC and other private sector partners to advance these common interests.

Steven G. Olive, Ph.D.
Mission Director
USAID/Regional Development Mission for Asia
At no other time have the stakes been higher or interests more aligned for women’s economic empowerment in Southeast Asia. ASEAN’s commitment as an institution as well as across its member states to gender equality is clear and has only added force to the private sector’s leadership in the region. This represents an immense opportunity to bolster women’s economic participation, which has the power to transform women’s lives and contribute to the economic development and prosperity in communities, nations, and the region.

Women contribute to the regional economy of ASEAN in many ways – as employees, managers, entrepreneurs, traders, and leaders. However, full economic opportunity remains just out of reach until the region more comprehensively leverages women’s complete potential by creating better conditions for their success. Lack of supportive workplace policies, practices, and programs inhibit the workforce entry, retention, and advancement of women with children. Additionally, women business owners in ASEAN often lack the resources to adapt to the digital environment and grow their businesses as well as engage in regional and international trade. Restrictive policies and gender gaps persist in confining the economic potential of women.

Nathan’s partnership with ASEAN extends more than fifteen years and we are proud of our women’s economic empowerment work with USAID including with the ASEAN-USAID Inclusive Growth in ASEAN through Innovation, Trade, and E-Commerce (ASEAN-USAID IGNITE) project. With our support, ASEAN has made critical advances in enhancing women entrepreneurs’ skills and networks as well as mainstreaming gender across the ASEAN Economic Community activities. Together, the public and private sector have an opportunity to build on this progress by implementing evidence-driven policies, building women’s skills, investing in women and their businesses, and increasing women’s representation and leadership. These actions will contribute to greater gender equality and economic growth across the region.

Nathan is pleased to have brought our deep experience in the region and in women’s economic empowerment to this paper and to collaborate so closely with the US-ASEAN Business Council. I believe this paper will invigorate the discourse between ASEAN policymakers, the private sector, and other key players around catalyzing economic opportunities for women in ASEAN.

Caroline Rubin
Managing Associate
Economic Engagement and Private Sector Development
Nathan Associates Inc.
Addressing gender inequities across the ASEAN region is critical to ensuring that people of all genders have an opportunity to fully engage in the economy and contribute to lasting economic growth. While the governments of the region have instituted significant reforms, and the private sector has led cutting-edge advancements to promote women’s economic participation over the past decade, much work remains. The rate of women’s participation in the labor force is, on average, 23% lower than for men in Southeast Asia, amounting to only 56% of women overall. And of those employed, more than two-thirds are employed in the informal sector. For young women aged 15-24, arguably one of the most important ages in ensuring a robust career, nearly 25% were out of school but had no jobs, compared to only 13% of young men. Restrictive laws and regulations, as well as a lack of supportive workplace policies and practices, impede women’s entry, retention, and advancement in the broader workforce. Women-owned businesses are often not provided the same access nor training opportunities, and hence have faced unique challenges in
adapting to the digital environment, as well as engaging in e-commerce and international trade. Investment tools and initiatives with an eye towards gender equality also remain nascent in the ASEAN region. Many of these challenges have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has become clear that this pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on women and girls, especially through the increased burden of unpaid care and domestic work. Addressing these serious challenges, however, comes with tangible economic benefits. McKinsey & Company estimates that if women's role in the labor market were identical to that of men, the collective gross domestic product (GDP) of Asia Pacific would increase by 12% (US$4.5 trillion) by 2025.

Further, focusing on areas such as e-commerce that have become critical for women-owned businesses in the wake of the pandemic could have a huge impact on long term economic recovery. The International Finance Corporation estimates that boosting women's e-commerce sales to the level of men's by 2025 would add over US$280 billion to Southeast Asia's e-commerce market by 2030.

The US-ASEAN Business Council's commitment to addressing gender equality and women's economic empowerment issues within ASEAN align with the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework, launched in September 2021. Further, the Council's efforts recognize and align with the current ASCC Blueprint 2025, which includes as an objective to “work towards achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.” The Council supports ASEAN’s continuing efforts to ensure that gender equality issues are not siloed within the social-cultural community but also incorporated into the

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Current | 2025 w/ Full Women Participation
broader economic community. While ASEAN continues to take substantial steps forward to bolster women’s economic empowerment in the region, public-private partnerships and collaboration with the private sector will become increasingly critical to ensure that businesses can effectively help drive positive changes to enhance women’s economic participation.

This paper describes the key barriers and challenges to gender equality and the advancement of women’s economic empowerment in the ASEAN region. It also closes with an overview of policy recommendations from a private sector perspective intended to help address these challenges across Southeast Asia.

**KEY ISSUES AND REGIONAL CHALLENGES**

**Laws and regulations are needed to adequately protect women’s full inclusion in the economy**

Across ASEAN, laws and regulations in ASEAN member states (AMS) enable or limit women entering, remaining, and advancing in the workforce. According to the World Bank’s 2021 Women, Business and the Law Index, AMS collectively score an average of 71.1 out of 100 (compared to a global average of 76.1), indicating there is room for growth in implementing protections or removing restrictive laws and regulations. For instance, some AMS lack meaningful protections against gender-based discrimination in employment, sexual harassment in the workplace, and dismissal of pregnant workers. Some AMS do not mandate equal remuneration for work of equal value or paid parental leave. Several AMS also prohibit women from working in the same sectors as men. Without the legal foundation to support women in the workforce, the private sector is left to rely on its own policies and practices to ensure that women can fully engage and businesses can employ diverse, gender-balanced workforces.

Laws and regulations can also hinder women’s ability to access credit and other financial services. For instance, just four AMS have a law prohibiting gender-based discrimination in access to credit. Facilitating greater access to credit can help support women starting or growing their businesses. Though women own between 33% to 66% of formal and informal small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, just 3-21% can access the formal financial services they need. Research
by the Asia Foundation suggests that the biggest difficulties women face when seeking business financing are high interest rates based on perceived risk (67%), inappropriate loan application packages (45%), unsuitable terms and tenure (33%), and lack of collateral (30%). Further, data from the Women, Business and the Law Index indicates that a greater share of women use debit cards and formal financial institution accounts in countries that prohibit gender-based discrimination in access to credit.

Other areas of opportunity include ensuring that women have the legal authority to directly sign contracts, purchase office and business space, hire employees, as well as open bank accounts and other necessary business practices.

CASE STUDY

Visa believes that communities and economies thrive when all individuals and business are included in the formal financial system and can benefit from financial and digital access. Visa continues to drive economic growth and improve lives through our global electronic payments network and the products offered across ASEAN. Visa initiatives and partnerships - including in Women’s economic advancement - focus on helping to enable equitable access to the financial and digital ecosystem for everyone, everywhere.
Investing in women-owned small businesses

Announced in April 2020, the Visa Foundation Equitable Access Initiative is a $200 million multi-year strategic commitment to address longer-term needs of small and micro businesses (SMBs), with an emphasis on fostering women's economic advancement, which is critical to long-term economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Foundation has provided support to Women's World Banking to develop sustainable solutions for women entrepreneurs to build their enterprises and establish financial safety nets while also advancing leadership skills and financial capabilities. The Visa Foundation also partnered with the Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs (ANDE) and USAID to channel investment through the Advancing Women's Empowerment Fund (AWEF) to test models for increasing investment into women-led small businesses including several countries in Southeast Asia.

Financial education for consumers and merchants

For over 20 years, Visa has been a private sector leader in developing innovative, free financial literacy programs that help people effectively learn the fundamentals of personal finance, including budgeting, saving, responsible spending and using credit wisely (this program is known as Practical Money Skills). Visa has also launched a similar program to help build capacity of small merchants and provide Practical Business Skills. Both of these education programs have been implemented across Southeast Asia, and many programs are targeted at women. Visa is a long-standing supporter of the US-ASEAN Business Council’s Alliance for Competitive SMEs, and has conducted capacity building workshops around the region on how digital payments can help enable SMES and has provided content and curriculum to the online ASEAN SME Academy.

Supportive workplace policies, practices, and programs are necessary to enhance women’s workforce retention and ensure the advancement of women with children

Workplace policies, practices, and programs that affect women's work after having children are critical to ensuring that working mothers have the option to remain in the workforce. In many AMS one in four women marry before they turn 18, which can lead to workplace attrition at a very young age. For those mothers with newborns, only one in three have access to maternity benefits. Initiatives to counter these challenges may include developing inclusive maternity programs, return-to-work programs for mothers returning from maternity leave, paid parental leave, and childcare. Without supportive return-to-work programs for mothers following maternity leave, women may be more likely to drop out of the workforce entirely. These programs may include progressive return to full-time hours and revised performance metrics. While paid maternity leave, ranging from 60 to
180 days, is mandated for all AMS, parental leave is less evenly applied and only mandated by one AMS.\textsuperscript{10} The provision of parental leave is critical for disrupting the gender norm of mothers as the sole caregivers, and encourages fathers to share in care work. Childcare is critically important to helping parents balance work and care responsibilities and its provision enables women to continue working. One study found that the use of childcare increased the probability of women in Vietnam having wage-earning jobs by 41%.\textsuperscript{11}

These policies, practices, and programs are important in ensuring women's labor continuity. By reducing the chances of women dropping out of the workforce after having children, women can remain on pace with their male counterparts in terms of earnings and career advancement. In addition to the impact on women themselves, these workplace policies, practices, and programs are known to be good for business. Paid parental leave, for instance, can lead to improved productivity and employee morale as well as long-term cost savings due to reduced staff turnover.\textsuperscript{12}

**Women-owned businesses face challenges in adapting to the digital environment**

Women business owners face challenges pertaining to digital access and literacy, e-payments, navigating complex e-commerce regulations, and online safety and security. Addressing these challenges is critical to the survival of many women-owned businesses across the region. The share of women-owned businesses engaged in e-commerce across the ASEAN region is small\textsuperscript{13} and those who are involved in e-commerce require support to grow.\textsuperscript{14} However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, e-commerce has enabled many women entrepreneurs to enter sectors where women were previously underrepresented, such as electronics.\textsuperscript{15} This transformation represents enormous opportunity for women in the region moving forward.

Mobile internet access is critical for using e-payments. Currently, there are 240 million women in East Asia and the Pacific who are not using mobile internet\textsuperscript{16}, which points to potential challenges in utilizing e-payments for their businesses.\textsuperscript{17} For women who have access to digital technologies, many lack the necessary confidence and skills required to effectively use them.\textsuperscript{18} Many of these challenges are common among women in all AMS. Recent research focused on the region highlights that women interested in starting online businesses would “greatly benefit from training courses that show how to start branding, using applications, designing websites, accountant skills in the online environment and employ various e-marketing tools to grow the business”.\textsuperscript{19}

Due to a lack of training opportunities, women-owned businesses sometimes lack a deep understanding of how best to navigate complex e-commerce-related regulations, especially given that these regulations can vary between each AMS. Further, digital laws and regulations can be complex and unclear for all. A coordinated approach to this regional challenge may be useful in supporting women interested in engaging in cross-border e-commerce within the ASEAN region. Streamlining or creating standards across ASEAN could help to mitigate the complex information issues that women business owners face.
CASE STUDY

The ASEAN Women Impacting Social Enterprise (WISE) 2021, a collaboration between ASEAN, SAP, and Angels of Impact, is a year-long incubation program designed to support women-led and indigenous-led social enterprises with technical assistance and funding. Angels of Impact, a Singapore-based social enterprise, implements the WISE fellowship program along with corporate volunteers – SAP being one of the key partners. The social enterprises selected for the 2021 cohort were all in the creative economy, namely producing traditional handwoven goods. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these social enterprises were forced to pivot rapidly to a digital environment. Below are three challenges that needed to be addressed to ensure their sustenance and growth, as well as three ways that the WISE program addressed these challenges.

Internet connectivity, access to mobile devices

In the new digital marketplace, businesses need to navigate digital platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Amazon to reach customers. Yet a continued lack of internet connectivity and available devices disproportionately impacts many businesses in the ASEAN region.

Angels of Impact sought out corporate partners in the telecom industry and supplied the necessary technology to create localized hotspots for 60 artisans in the Maranao community in the Philippines. The collaboration between Angels of Impact, as a Singapore-based social enterprise funding others, a large telecommunications company, and Maranao social enterprise demonstrates what success can be achieved through cross-corporate collaborations to improve access to the digital environment.

Continued on next page.
Women-owned businesses face barriers to engaging in regional and international trade

Helping women-owned business to export their goods and services to international markets allows those businesses to grow and expand while contributing to overall economic growth. Globally, women-owned SMEs that export are more profitable, productive, and employ more people than firms that do not engage in trade.\textsuperscript{20}

For these reasons, supporting women exporters is critical to unlocking the full economic potential of the ASEAN region. However, women-owned businesses engaging or intending to engage in cross-border trade face challenges such as those pertaining to their business size and trouble accessing trade finance. Women-owned businesses in ASEAN tend to be MSMEs, which due to their small size face additional challenges such as high trade costs.\textsuperscript{21} Further, women-owned firms in Asia are 10% more likely to need trade finance, but are discouraged from applying for it.\textsuperscript{22} The women that do apply for trade finance are rejected more often than their male counterparts due to insufficient collateral or no existing relationship with a financial institution.\textsuperscript{23} Addressing these challenges will be important to facilitating greater access to trade for women.

Advance e-commerce knowledge

Mere access to internet and internet devices is not sufficient to improve operations for all enterprises. These enterprises also need increased digital literacy to understand best practices for all available tools. Through the ASEAN-WISE Fellowship, corporate volunteers from SAP have worked to increase local business knowledge of Shopify analytics to enable businesses to target overseas audiences and increase their sales. This also increases revenue for the women weavers as well as extends production opportunities to more weavers, thereby improving the economic stability and participation of low-income women in the Philippines.

Access to Capital/Funding Readiness

Many enterprises need help preparing to absorb funding before they can realistically raise capital. This involves understanding their financial health, amalgamating their records into one central, digital place, and forecasting. Out of the enterprises selected for WISE, 70\% required assistance in these areas. The ASEAN-WISE Fellowship covers financial analysis at great length through monthly workshops for all cohort participants, including both social enterprises, corporate volunteers, and guest speakers. This has helped local enterprises prioritize and streamline activities, and ensure the longevity of their businesses. Angels of Impact also identifies opportunities for enterprises to access capital. Only with this capital will the enterprises be able to respond to market fluctuations, compete at a regional scale, and ultimately sustain their families and communities.
Efforts are needed to address the gender gap in financial literacy

There is growing evidence that women lag behind men in financial literacy, which directly impacts their ability to make sound financial decisions for themselves and their family, participate in the stock market, plan for retirement and build wealth. A 2019 study commissioned by Allianz Life Insurance Company found that while female empowerment trends were on the rise, women still struggled to make progress with financial literacy in alarming numbers. The study indicated that 57% say they wish they were more confident in their financial decision making. Recent research out of George Washington University’s Global Financial Literacy Excellence Center also suggests the deep importance of building financial education initiatives adapted specifically to women. Given that women also have a significantly higher average life expectancy than men, retirement planning and financial literacy are even more critical for women.

CASE STUDY

As a logistics provider operating in over 220 countries and territories, and a leading advocate for global trade, UPS has seen how the playing field remains an unequal one for women in global trade. That is why in 2018 UPS and the UPS Foundation launched the Women Exporters Program, aimed at advancing women’s economic empowerment through capacity-building, identifying market access opportunities, and fostering a regulatory framework that is free of discrimination.

To support women entrepreneurs in the Asia Pacific region, UPS has partnered with the Asian Trade Centre Foundation (ATCF) to run the Asia Women Exporters’ Mentorship Program, a 12-month mentorship and training program for women-owned small businesses. Ten women – included from ASEAN Member States Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, and the Philippines – were provided weekly mentorship and training by UPS’s in-house experts on customs, supply chain optimization and logistics; international trade experts at the Asia Trade Centre; and other industry experts on diverse subjects like product photography, marketing, and human resource management.

Capacity-building alone, however, is not enough; it must be supplemented by efforts to promote a level playing field for women in the first place. In promoting business-friendly policy reforms leveraging our unique global experience, the private sector must ensure that these policy recommendations also address broader societal needs. That is why global companies continue to advocate for inclusive trade rules and simplified border processes so that women and other underrepresented groups share equally in the benefits of trade.
Efforts around gender equality in the investment space are still nascent in the ASEAN region

Women as individuals and business owners are grossly underrepresented in the capital and investment space across ASEAN. Women comprise just 12% of senior investment professionals across private equity and venture capital in the emerging markets of East and Southeast Asia. Even more sobering, women-led businesses receive merely 9% of venture capital in East and Southeast Asia.28

Gender lens investing is one area of work that has aimed, in part, to address these disparities. This form of investment strategy takes into consideration gender-based factors across the investment process to advance gender equality and better inform investment decisions.39 The ASEAN region has forayed into gender lens investment. For instance, Impact Investment Exchange (IIX) launched the Women’s Livelihood Bond series, and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation launched the Asia Women Impact Fund (AWIF) aimed at fulfilling the commitment that Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made at the ASEAN Business and Investment Summit in 2015.30 However, uptake of gender lens investing in the ASEAN region has been slower than other regions. There is still a general lack of understanding of the perceived risk of gender lens investing. Increased data collection efforts are needed to build the investor knowledge base and quantify the benefits of gender lens investing, such as reduced risk and diversified investments.

While the region has participated in initiatives that leverage stock exchanges to advance gender equality, such as the IFC’s Ring the Bell for Gender Equality initiative, there is room for deeper action. For instance, stock exchanges in Australia, Italy, and South Africa have gender-specific listing rules for the stock exchanges and the Hong Kong Stock Exchange requires all listed companies to include gender diversity disclosures in their IPO prospectuses.31 There is still room for the ASEAN region to tap into stock exchanges as a vehicle for holding public companies accountable for gender equality.
Inspired by Meta's long-term commitment to women's economic empowerment through digital inclusion, the company launched its flagship SheMeansBusiness initiative in 2016 on International Women's Day to support female-owned enterprises to enter the digital economy, through digital skills training and business inspiration, as well as opportunities for mentorship through a network of local partner organizations and women entrepreneurs. In 2020, the program expanded to include business resilience and financial education training in selected markets in Asia-Pacific and Latin America.

Through expanded online learning, SheMeansBusiness has become a key example of how industry leaders can support women entrepreneurs during the pandemic. Women-led businesses have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 as they are more likely to operate micro-businesses, less likely to receive financial support, and are concentrated in sectors which have been particularly impacted by lockdown measures. Supporting women, especially in these difficult times, is essential to ensure inclusive economic recovery. For that, the structural gaps in access to finance and digitization need to be reduced and gender-sensitive policies and programs need to be scaled to ensure access to digital technologies and financial services. Through SheMeansBusiness, Meta is determined to work in collaboration with governments, international organizations, civil society organizations and the private sector to support these efforts.

SheMeansBusiness is also part of Meta's commitment to support Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 8. Since 2016, SheMeansBusiness has reached over 1.5 million women with training and training resources across 38 markets, through a global network of 40 community partners.

Similar to sustainability goals, public gender equality targets for listed companies that provide these companies with adequate time (ten to fifteen years) to achieve these targets may be useful in promoting more gender-balanced boards and executive leadership teams.

**Additional efforts focused on women’s healthcare are necessary, and can have a tremendous impact on regional economic growth**

It is widely accepted by the global community that better health outcomes for women lead to greater economic participation. Yet, women face challenges pertaining to gender-based violence, healthcare access and awareness, and workplace health and safety that impede their ability to contribute to work and contribute to the economy. According to the 2021 ASEAN Gender Outlook, 30% of women are still unable to see a doctor when needed.\(^2\)
In the process of building back economies post-COVID, nations must put women at the center of their economic agendas to ensure maximum growth. COVID-19 has had a tremendous impact on women’s health, catalyzing disruptions to family planning services and contributing to a significant deterioration of mental health. Ensuring women have the necessary access to proper healthcare in the coming months and years will set a foundation for not only physical but also economic health.

In terms of socioeconomic benefits, achieving universal access to quality sexual and reproductive health services is estimated to yield returns of US$120 for every dollar invested. In fact, investing just US$1 in contraceptive services saves up to US$4 in health expenditure and as much as US$31 in other social services such as education, housing or sanitation. Family planning can also help countries realize a ‘demographic dividend’, a boost in economic productivity that occurs when there are growing numbers of people in the workforce and falling numbers of dependents.

While data for ASEAN shows a relatively low prevalence of violence against women by an intimate partner compared to other regions of the world, between 6% to 11% of women in the region still report experiencing violence at the hands of their partner each year. Sadly, 25% of women in the region still believe it is justified for a man to beat his wife in some situations. This has a major economic impact. For instance, the Philippines could save an estimated US$2.7 billion annually by curbing domestic violence and its resulting effects on productivity and absenteeism.

Healthcare extends to the household as well. While AMS are rapidly transitioning to cleaner energy sources, insufficient or slow investments in renewable or low-carbon energy solutions has meant that the tremendous increase in energy demand (80% over the last 20 years) has led to a corresponding increase in the use of coal and other fossil fuels. This has created significant air pollution problems both inside and outside the home, negatively impacting overall health, primarily for women.

In many ASEAN households, the use of potentially harmful fuels such as charcoal, wood or crop waste, is still prevalent. Their effect on indoor air quality affects women disproportionately, since women are often in charge of preparing family meals and spend more time at home. Air pollution is linked to both heart and respiratory diseases, and for pregnant women it can sometimes correlate with low birth weight, preterm birth and small-gestational-age births. Given that women are often in charge of childcare and caring for the ill, along with severe stress and other mental health issues, these factors can lead to women dropping out of the workforce entirely.

The urban-rural divide exacerbates challenges to women’s economic participation

In a 2021 study by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, researchers found that in Indonesia (by far the region’s largest economy with the fourth largest population in the world) there are significant differences for women in urban and rural populations.

On average across the country, 23% of women lack access to clean cooking fuels, nearly one in four are child brides, and 29% have only completed primary schooling (at most). Yet in Banten, the westernmost province of Java, 93% lack access to clean cooking fuels, more than half marry as children, and 77% have only completed primary schooling. In Jakarta, just to
the east of Banten, virtually none lack access to clean cooking fuels. These differences are but one example across AMS of the striking challenges governments face when looking to build policies focused on the urban-rural divide.

CASE STUDY

For the past 150 years, Kimberly-Clark and its portfolio of brands have been an indispensable part of life for people in more than 175 countries. Powered by its purpose of providing Better Care for a Better World, Kimberly-Clark has been fueled by ingenuity, creativity and understanding of people’s most essential needs.

In Malaysia, Kimberly-Clark has been championing the progress of women across the country through its feminine hygiene brand Kotex. The Kotex School Education Program plays a critical role in supporting Kimberly-Clark’s ambition to positively impact the lives of 1 billion underserved people around the world by 2030. Over the past two decades, Kotex has been working closely with schools in Malaysia on menstrual hygiene management and education programs, positively impacting millions of teenage girls, and raising awareness about menstrual hygiene to ensure that a period never gets in the way of their progress.

As the COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of schools in Malaysia, the Kotex school education program pivoted online. In 2021, the Kotex #SheCan Project, a microsite leveraging gamification elements, was launched to engage today’s digital-first generation of girls and to allow as many as possible to safely participate in all activities in light of the pandemic. Through this program, which has been recognized by the Ministry of Education, Kotex worked with 109 schools and successfully empowered 12,000 girls in 2021 alone despite the logistical and digital infrastructure challenges faced by the Malaysian school system. Further, these teens took part in Kotex’s self-expression competition which saw girls across the nation penning letters to Kotex about how they will not let their periods get in the way of their dreams, goals and ambitions.

In addition to menstrual hygiene management and education programs, Kotex is also dedicated to helping girls turn their ambitions into reality through the Kotex #SheCan Fund. In 2021, Kotex announced that the #SheCan Fund would be awarded to the top 10 schools who took part in the #SheCan Project, supporting these schools in building better learning facilities that would provide a higher quality learning environment for the girls.
In 2022, Kotex is looking to expand the Kotex School Education Program to further empower more girls in Malaysia, particularly within underserved communities.

Looking at the urban-rural divide from a health angle highlights additional challenges. Maternal mortality in the ASEAN region has dropped from 214 to 137 per 100,000 live births in the past two decades, partly due to increased access to healthcare, including professional obstetric and gynecological care. Currently, nearly 9 out of 10 deliveries in ASEAN are attended by physicians, nurses, and other skilled professionals. However, for women living in rural areas and the poorest households, the statistics are much less encouraging. An estimated 33% of births to rural women take place unattended by skilled health personnel, leading to more complications and higher rates of infant mortality.

Infant mortality ultimately reflects the effect of social, economic and environmental factors on mothers and their infants, as well as the overall effectiveness of national health systems to reach more rural communities. Factors such as the health of the mother, quality of antenatal and childbirth care, preterm birth and birth weight, immediate newborn care and infant feeding practices are important determinants of infant mortality. Across ASEAN, important inequities continue to persist in infant mortality rates largely related to income status and mothers’ education level. In Cambodia, Myanmar and the Philippines, infant mortality rates are more than three times higher in poor rural households compared to rich urban ones. Similarly, in Vietnam and Laos, children born to mothers with no education had a six to seven times higher risk of dying before their first birthday compared to children whose mothers had achieved secondary or higher education.

The urban-rural divide is also present in technological access and use, which is key to women’s economic participation. Globally, the gender gap in internet use is higher in rural areas than in urban areas for industrialized countries, but the reverse is true in developing and emerging economies. In lower- and middle-income countries globally, women in urban areas are 23% more likely to own a mobile phone than women in rural areas.

According to UN Women, women in rural areas are more likely to have shorter term and more precarious jobs and are generally less protected than women living in urban areas. And in rural areas, investing in infrastructure such as water, sanitation, electricity, and energy generation can ease women’s household responsibilities and enable them to spend more time on formal, paid employment opportunities. Additionally, women entrepreneurs in rural areas have less access to business development services, which leave them further disadvantaged.

**While substantial progress has been made, additional efforts are needed to address the gender data gap**

Efforts to target gender inequality cannot be monitored or evaluated for efficacy if the data does not exist. Areas of intersection, such as the disproportionate effect of natural disasters and climate change on women are woefully understudied and undercounted,
meaning that targeted interventions cannot be designed in the first place. Long term cause and effect such as infertility’s impact on national GDP cannot be studied without consistent access to open, accurate data. For example, medical practitioners now know that a heart attack presents differently between men and women. Women are far more likely to have fatigue, nausea, cold sweats, and heartburn during the attack. By not including an equal number of participants across genders and not separating studies’ data by gender, researchers are depriving the public of potentially life-saving information that could lead to more effective diagnoses.

Even more concerning is the introduction of artificial intelligence into medical diagnostics, where the data gap and a male-biased curriculum already leaves women 50% more likely to be misdiagnosed if they have a heart attack. AI offers huge potential, but only if it is trained to consider potential biases.

For these reasons, it is critical that a gender lens is applied when designing similar processes, studies, and/or policies. In order to accomplish this, more needs to be done to increase awareness, prioritization, and collaboration to improve gender-specific data. Not only is there a strong health reason to address this gap, but a strong economic case as these solutions have the potential to unlock approximately US$3 trillion in economic potential worldwide. Ultimately, these investments in women’s health are key to not only increasing health outcomes for women, their children and their families, but also to growing the global economy.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

ASEAN stakeholders and policymakers across the region can further support women’s economic empowerment through the following actions:

1. ASEAN could establish an annual public-private sector dialogue on women’s economic empowerment. Such a dialogue could be held on the margins of meetings that fall within the ASEAN Economic Community, such as the ASEAN Digital Ministers’ Meeting (ADGMIN). The dialogue would give ASEAN the opportunity to identify key issues impacting women across the region while allowing private sector stakeholders to provide inputs and contribute to potential solutions.

2. The ASEAN Committee on Women (ACW) could work alongside the US-ASEAN Business Council to develop and promote the business case for legal and regulatory reforms that promote women’s economic participation and generate economic growth for the region. This may take the form of an economic impact assessment or other quantitative study.
The ASEAN Coordinating Committee on Electronic Commerce (ACCEC) could lead the development, in coordination with the private sector, of **regional guidelines, regional common standards, or a repository of e-commerce regulations** in the region. Because e-commerce regulations can vary from one AMS to another and tend to be complex in nature, providing a one-stop shop for information on e-commerce regulations could be useful to women entrepreneurs who lack reliable access to or an understanding of these regulations. Streamlining regulations could also help promote greater engagement by women entrepreneurs in cross-border e-commerce.

ASEAN Member States could aim to **collect more data on women traders and encourage the evaluation of trade agreements through a gender lens** to ensure such agreements are equitable to women. Currently it is difficult to understand or demonstrate the impact of trade on women and the impact of women traders on the economy. It is also difficult to develop evidence-based trade policies that are gender equitable without this data. It is important that women traders play a role in trade negotiations so their voices may be heard. **Trade ministers could develop greater education outreach programs to update the entire business community on opportunities within trade agreements and specifically leverage resources (such as the ITC and World Bank) to support greater utilization of these agreements by women entrepreneurs.**

Finance ministers across ASEAN could **work with stock exchanges to develop gender equality targets** for listed companies. These targets should provide sufficient timelines for companies to meet them and work toward metrics such as improved gender-balance of boards and executive leadership teams. The finance ministers could also **work with education ministers to bolster women-focused financial literacy programs.**

ASEAN Member States’ governments could **increase investment in accessible, affordable contraception options for women** – specifically LARCs (long acting reversible contraceptives), which are the most effective form of birth control and have a cost savings of US$7 for every US$1 spent on services and supplies.43

ASEAN Member States could encourage **rural provinces and communities to enact stronger regulations supporting gender equality** and to ensure that adequate financial resources are put towards supporting women’s and girls’ access to education in these communities.

ASEAN Member States’ governments could work to **adopt the UN Women/Paris21/Women Count Framework and Implementation Guidelines for Assessing Data and Statistical Capacity Gaps for Better Gender Statistics.** AMS could also appoint an office of gender statistics within the National Bureau of Statistics in each country if one does not already exist, and invest in and commit to the uptake of available digital technologies (such as smartphones) so that sensitive information can be captured in an anonymous and stigma-free manner.
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Endnotes

1  https://www.ilo.org/shinyapps/bulkexplorer20/?lang=en&segment=indicator&id=EAP_2WAP_SEX_AGE_RT_A
2  https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/236f41d0-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/236f41d0-en
12  https://investinginwomen.asia/posts/why-companies-should-advance-parental-leave/
15  Ibid
19  https://www.apec.org/Publications/2020/03/Supporting-Women-in-Starting-Online-Business-Program
20  https://www.intracen.org/uploadedFiles/intracenorg/Content/Publications/women_in_trade_web(1).pdf
The US-ASEAN Business Council is the premier advocacy organization for U.S. corporations operating within the dynamic Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The Council works across all 10 ASEAN member states, and is proud to represent more than 175 major U.S. companies that span every industry. Member companies include those which have been active in Southeast Asia for more than a century as well as newcomers looking to expand their presence in one of the world’s most dynamic markets. The Council works to deliver tangible results that support its members’ business objectives by removing constraints on trade and investment in ASEAN. The Council also works to elevate the importance of the U.S.-ASEAN economic relationship to American and ASEAN public policy makers and business leaders. Founded in 1984, the Council is also the only American organization written into the ASEAN Charter, which allows member companies to participate in regular engagements with ASEAN policymakers. Its unique regional, national, and industry-specific intelligence and its deeply cultivated and extensive relationships allow it to engage key actors in Southeast Asia at the highest levels. For more information, please visit usasean.org.
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