

Women Migrant Workers in ASEAN Economic Integration

Summary Brief

Background and rationale for the study

The Study is part of the Work Plan 2016-2020 of the ASEAN Committee on the Implementation of the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers. It aims to shed new light on the trends of women's labour mobility, access of women migrant workers (WMWs) to the labour markets, their contribution to ASEAN economies and high growth sectors, and challenges of social and economic inclusion. The Study also reviews the current migrant governance frameworks at national and regional levels, providing evidence-based policy recommendations to reap the benefits of women labour mobility, to provide fair and equitable migration opportunities for women and girls in the ASEAN region and enhance regional social and economic development.

Freer movement of skilled labour and equitable economic development are key components of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) integration agenda. To facilitate the governance of labour flows and ensure the successful integration of migrant workers in ASEAN labour markets, a plethora of regional frameworks, coordination mechanisms and national policy initiatives have been devised, setting ASEAN at the forefront of the international governance of labour mobility. Substantive contribution towards the region's labour markets, production and remittance flows is made by women and girls who account for nearly half of all migrant working age population in the ASEAN. Yet research has raised concerns about intersecting gendered vulnerabilities impacting access to employment, rights and opportunities as well as income and social protection for women and girls at different stages of the migration journey. Intrinsically, a fair question to ask is whether women and girls migrant workers, who are often employed especially in lesser-skill professions, will benefit from the greater mobility and job opportunities in the region.

With its focus on women migrant workers this report supplements and complements previous studies by ILO-ADB (2015) and UN Women (2016) on the social and labour market impact of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), thereby completing a trilogy of evidence based reports on the equity dimension of ASEAN integration. Finally, it contributes to filling a gap in current debates on women migrants as potential agents of development by shifting the focus from development impacts of women migration in countries of origin to their economic contribution to economies and labour markets in destination countries.

Methodology

An extensive literature review exploring linkages between migrant workforce, women's work, trade liberalization and socio-economic policies and a mixed methodology, using both quantitative and qualitative data, has been used to undertake this study which was guided by a three-tiered approach. The image below provides details on the methods and data used for the analysis under the three tiers.

Tier-1	Tier-2	Tier-3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional analysis of migration trends of WMWs in the ASEAN, their demographic and socio-economic characteristics, and contribution to ASEAN receiving economies • Based on secondary data from national (LFSs) and international sources (WB, UN DESA, ILO) – for migrants employed formally and entering through registered channels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thematic analysis to understand the gender dimensions of WMW's participation, employment and working conditions in ASEAN PIS • Five salient themes for in-depth analysis are explored here and an exemplifying analysis of the hierarchical division of labour in the infrastructure sector is undertaken • Primary data collected through structured interviews with 85 key stakeholders, including WMWs, was used for this analysis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The policy analysis draws the linkage between ASEAN level policy commitments, bilateral agreements between select country and national level migration policies to highlight how it affects WMW's access to decent work and social protection. • Analysis based on secondary data and primary information collected through questionnaires from multiple stakeholders (i.e. governments' representatives, NGOs, TUs, workers associations, and international organizations).

Main Findings

Findings in the report apply to regulated and unregulated intra-ASEAN WMWs employed in formal priority sectors in the top net-receiving countries and are structured around the three main areas of analysis: regional trends and characteristics of women migration and access to labour markets; challenges and barriers faced by WMWs in ASEAN PIS; and the migration governance framework in the ASEAN region.

1. Regional trends and characteristics of women migration and access to labour markets

With women migrants forming nearly half of the total intra-ASEAN migrant population, the study finds that:

- ***WMWs make up a significant share of the labour force in ASEAN destination countries.***
- ***Households, agriculture, construction and manufacturing are the primary sectors of employment of WMWs.***
- ***WMWs are largely young, poorly educated and employed in the lesser-skilled professions.***
- ***WMWs in ASEAN earn significantly less than men and the local female workforce.***
- ***WMWs contribute significantly towards the destination countries' economies.***

2. Challenges and barriers faced by WMWs in ASEAN Priority Sectors

- ***High administrative and intermediation costs discourage WMWs from the use of official migration channels.***
- ***WMW in ASEAN high growth sectors dominate the bottom of the value chain.***
- ***Limited social protection coverage and poor working conditions characterize WMWs' employment in the high growth industries.***

- ***National mechanisms for skill development are not in sync with the high growth ASEAN sectors.***
- ***Limited access to information still undermines WMWs' ability to enjoy their rights and entitlements.***

3. The migration governance framework in the ASEAN region.

- ***Priority sectors and professions identified by the AEC and its focus on high skilled workers do not reflect the reality of WMWs employment.***
- ***AEC is trade and investment focused, relatively less focused on labour market conditions.***
- ***WMWs' access to social security is uneven across the ASEAN region.***
- ***Gaps in the enforcement of national labour legislations can undermine the protection of migrant employment rights.***

Conclusions and Recommendations

This report has revealed the significant role of WMWs as economic players for the ASEAN region. Yet this contribution remains often an unaccounted component of regional and national progress and WMWs workers still experience challenges in fulfilling their economic potential and enjoying decent and equitable work conditions. For the ASEAN regional integration to deliver on its commitment towards equitable growth and a people-centered community, it is imperative that women migrant workers are not left behind and their contribution is acknowledged in the development of regional integration frameworks.

Solutions to address these challenges must be concertedly undertaken by both destination and origin countries. ASEAN member states also need to recognize and address the policy dissonance between the regional integration frameworks and the reality of women's migration patterns in the region, ensuring recognition of lower-skilled and informal work as well as the gender responsiveness of migration and labour market policies. On the demand side, it is important to recognize that current migration processes are cumbersome and create loopholes for recruiters, employers and middlemen to exploit vulnerable workers, especially women. It is also vital ensuring social protection and social security mechanism and synchronize them with national migration policies; strengthening decent work enforcement mechanisms through robust non-discriminatory labour laws; and providing improved monitoring of working conditions. Improved data collection and statistics on employment of WMWs in National Priority Sect is also paramount. On the supply side, better skill development opportunities linked to the high-growth sectors and access to information about training is necessary. Furthermore, bilateral social security agreements which ensure portability need to be pursued and laws on recruitment processes meeting international standards and working towards reducing transaction cost of migration need to be strengthen.

To conclude, this research has revealed the need for promoting gender mainstreaming and gender responsiveness in migration processes and governance at both regional and national levels. To this end, further specific actionable recommendations are provided in the report to be implemented at both regional and national (countries of origin and destination) levels.