

Women's Economic Empowerment and the Care Economy in ASEAN

A DATA SNAPSHOT



Accelerating gender equality in the world of work can unleash the potential of women's economic empowerment and their contribution to inclusive growth across the region.

Within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls (Goal 5) is central to sustainable development. Women's agency, participation in decision-making and access to and control over productive resources are crucial for realizing all of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).¹ Women's economic empowerment has favourable effects on both societal and economic transformation.² The increased participation of women in the labour market contributes to inclusive economic growth. In South-East Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has called for equitable access to education, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for women, and this can contribute to poverty alleviation. Women who are financially empowered invest in their children's education, thereby enhancing the health and educational attainment of the future workforce. Challenging gender stereotypes and disparities to ensure more equitable economic opportunities for women and girls is a direct means of empowerment for women for shared prosperity in the region. For instance, women migrant workers contribute to sustainable development and reduced inequalities through remittances and skills transfer. When women are

offered equal opportunities in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, they can foster innovation and sustainable infrastructure. Women and girls also play a vital role in managing natural resources, promoting peacebuilding and sustaining agricultural productivity. However, structural discrimination against women and girls limits the positive impacts of women's economic empowerment on all SDGs.³



THE 2030 AGENDA UNDERSCORES THAT GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT ARE CENTRAL TO ATTAINING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR ALL.

South-East Asia is a highly dynamic and diverse region. Over the past 50 years, the region has been through a rapid economic transformation, urbanization and demographic shifts. With a combined population of more than 670 million, the region has the third-largest labour force in the world, behind China and India.⁴ Economic growth has been rapid and trade both within and outside ASEAN has continuously expanded. Despite the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, economic growth in the region will continue to rise, driven by robust domestic demand and the ongoing recovery of the tourism sector.⁵ Across the ten ASEAN Member States, living standards have increased over the past two decades.⁶ Concurrently,

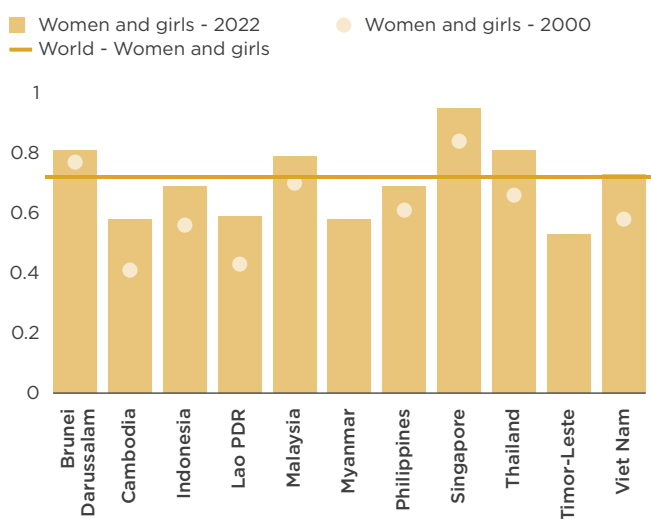
significant progress has been made in reducing gender gaps in income poverty, narrowing the overall proportion of the employed population living below the international poverty line. Yet, women and girls in the region rank below men and boys in the Human Development Index (HDI) except for Thailand and Viet Nam (figure 1). Gender disparities persist in the labour market across the ASEAN region with fewer women and girls participating compared to men and boys (figure 2). Indicators on gender equality and women’s empowerment show that most countries in the region exhibit scores below the global average (figure 3).

More efforts are still required to promote equitable opportunities for good health (including bodily integrity), education, skill-building and knowledge, labour and financial inclusion, participation in decision-making and freedom from violence for women and girls across the region.

INCOME POVERTY ALONE DOES NOT ENCOMPASS ALL THE DIFFERENT WAYS IN WHICH WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE ASEAN REGION EXPERIENCE DEPRIVATION.

FIGURE 1.

Human Development Index 2000 and 2022, by sex



Source: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) – Data Center.

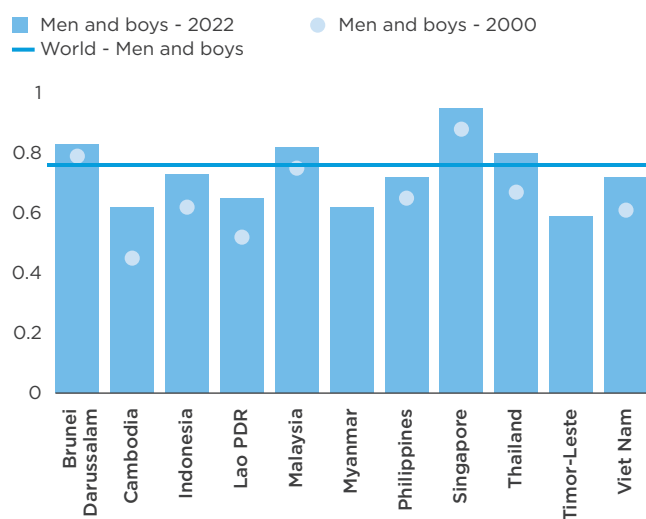
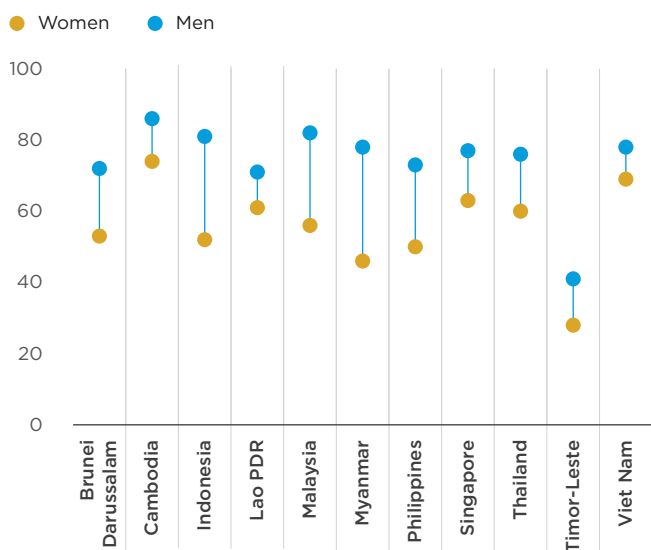


FIGURE 2.

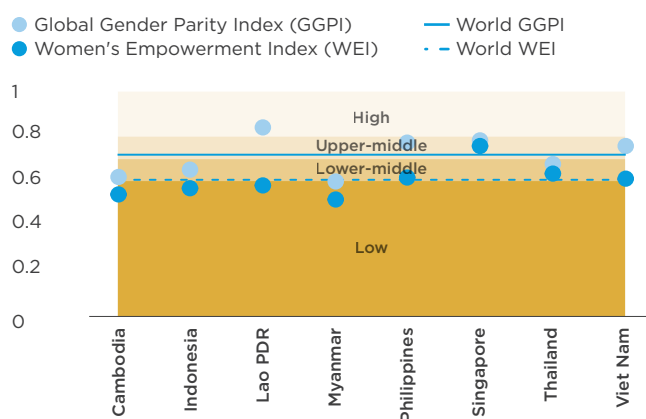
Labour force participation rate (aged 15+), by sex, latest year (percentage)



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) Gender Data Hub.

FIGURE 3.

Twin indices on women’s empowerment and gender equality, 2022



Note: WEI includes: life and good health; education, skill-building and knowledge; labour and financial inclusion; participation in decision-making; and freedom from violence. GGPI includes: life and good health; education, skill-building and knowledge; labour and financial inclusion; and participation in decision-making. Both indices are scored from 0 to 1, as follows: less than 0.600 for low; 0.600–0.699 for lower-middle; 0.700–0.799 for upper-middle; and 0.800 or greater for high.

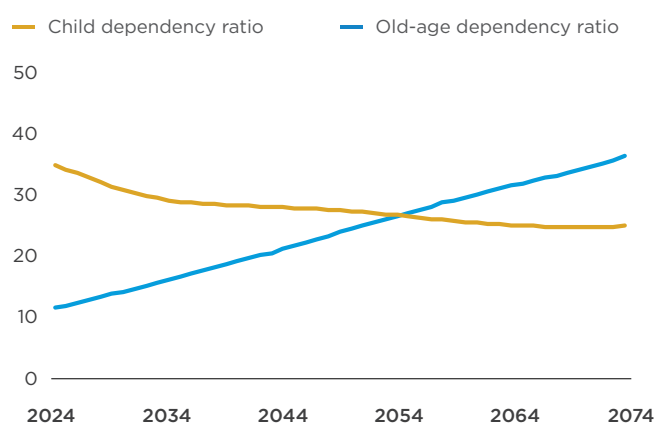
Source: UNDP and UN Women.

Advancing gender equality and women’s economic empowerment in the world of work in the ASEAN region is vital to accelerate actions towards resilient and inclusive economies as well as sustainable development. However, unleashing this opportunity calls for actions to tackle structural barriers to gender equality and women’s economic participation. One of the most persistent barriers is the unequal allocation of women’s time to unpaid care and domestic work. While time-use data are scarce in the region, available data from Cambodia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Malaysia and Thailand show that women and girls provide more unpaid care and domestic services compared to men and boys.⁷ As a result, women and girls face time poverty with fewer opportunities for education, employment and leadership in economic and political spheres. Yet, without women’s unpaid contribution, economies and societies

would come to a halt. Therefore, the 2021 [ASEAN Comprehensive Framework on Care Economy](#) redefines care as an investment essential for achieving long-term sustainability and aligns with multiple SDGs, particularly those related to poverty reduction, health and gender equality. Care entails those essential services necessary for survival, social cohesion and reproduction. In the care economy, women and girls play the predominant role as care workers, however, these jobs offer low pay and limited social protection, thus they perpetuate gender discrimination in the workforce. The economic contribution of women and girls can foster the resilience needed to face emerging challenges in the ASEAN region. For instance, population projections for the region anticipate significant demographic shifts with important implications on various economic sectors in the future (figure 4).⁸

FIGURE 4.

Projections for the dependency ratio in the ASEAN region 2022–2074



A decrease in the population of working age due to declining birth rates and mortality rates is expected to have significant impact on societies and economies, and demographic shifts raise the question of who will provide long-term care for older people, a traditional role of women and girls within families. Ageing societies are likely to put pressure on fiscal systems as demands rise for costly care services, such as long-term care. This will increase pressure on health services and may reduce overall access to health care and social services, and it may increase the demands on women and girls to provide unpaid care work. Moreover, the combination of declining fertility rates and longer life expectancy for women is expected to further intensify the demand for elderly care, especially for women.

ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES IN THE ASEAN REGION ARE AGEING. WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE CARE ECONOMY PLAY A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN DEVELOPING THE NECESSARY RESILIENCE TO TACKLE EMERGING DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS.

Note: Projections based on the medium scenario.⁹

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. World Population Prospects 2024.

As reflected in the **ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening the Care Economy and Resilience Towards the Post-2025 ASEAN Community**, launched by the Lao People’s Democratic Republic as the Chair of ASEAN in 2024, the care economy in ASEAN is a critical area of focus, and transforming the care economy as well as tackling gender inequalities in the world of work is increasingly a policy priority. Ultimately, this requires addressing critical gaps to promote women’s capacity, voice and participation in shaping policy and decision-making to promote more equitable distribution of care and domestic work, women’s rights to decent and productive work and inclusive growth for women and girls at all levels. By leveraging the latest gender data, this factsheet aims to enhance evidence-informed decision-making in catalytic areas for women’s economic empowerment and gender equality by transforming care systems and creating a more equitable and just world of work in the ASEAN region.^{10,11}

TRANSFORMING CARE SYSTEMS



Care provision involves meeting the physical, social and emotional needs of dependent individuals, such as children, older people and people with disabilities. This includes one-on-one activities between the caregiver and the person in need of care, such as breastfeeding, helping a child with homework, or providing emotional support to someone who is ill. These activities are commonly referred to as direct care. However, care-related activities also include a wide range of economically productive tasks that are essential but do not involve direct interaction with the person in need of care. These tasks, known as indirect care, include everyday household chores such as cooking and cleaning. Additionally, in low-income countries, a significant portion of care work may involve further unpaid activities such as fetching water and collecting firewood for the household and its members. These goods are used for the household's consumption to sustain life.¹²

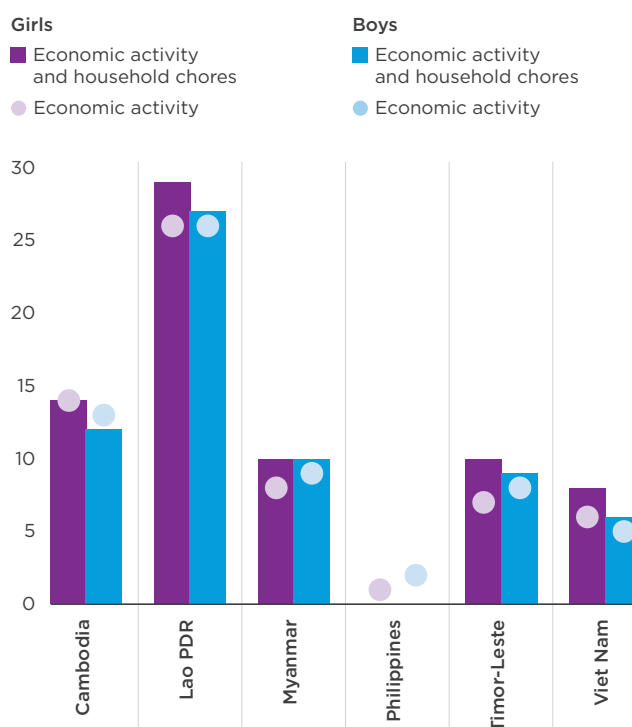
CARE IS ESSENTIAL FOR THE WELL-BEING OF CURRENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS, AS IT CONTRIBUTES TO DEVELOPING HUMAN CAPITAL AND ENHANCING SOCIAL COHESION.

WOMEN AND GIRLS PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE AS THE PRIMARY PROVIDERS OF BOTH UNPAID AND PAID CARE SERVICES.

In the ASEAN region, many care services are provided by unpaid women and girls within the household. Gender disparities are pronounced, with women and girls at a disadvantage.¹³ The unequal distribution of care work greatly contributes to time poverty among women and girls, ultimately limiting their opportunities in other vital aspects of life and adding to their economic exclusion. Systemic barriers to women's economic empowerment begin early in life. Girls in the region often have more engagement in economic activities and household chores compared to boys (figure 5).

FIGURE 5.

Proportion of children engaged in economic activity and household chores, by sex, latest year (percentage)



Note: For Cambodia, the proportion of children engaged in economic activity and household chores refers to 2012, while the proportion of children engaged in economic activity refers to 2017.

Source: SDG Global Database.

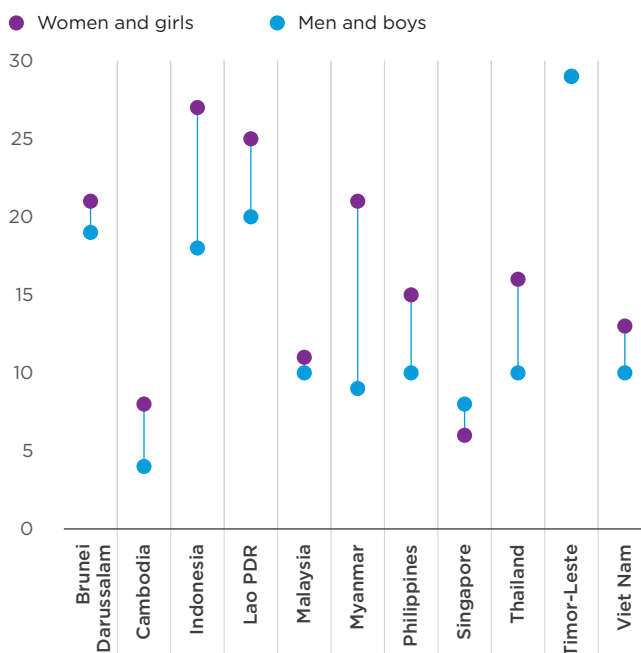
The reliance of economies and societies on the household sector, especially on women's unpaid work, suggests that women subsidize the provision of public services like health care and education, contributing to the overall functioning of the economy and society. This is particularly evident during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and in contexts where access to quality and affordable care services is limited.

Unpaid care work in the ASEAN region is predominantly carried out by women and girls, which significantly impacts their ability to access, retain and advance in paid employment, and it may potentially limit their access to quality jobs.

Gender inequality in unpaid care work is a significant factor contributing to the economic exclusion of women and girls and the exacerbation of gender disparities in the workforce. The unequal share of family responsibilities often prevents more girls than boys from accessing education, employment, or training. In the ASEAN region, except for Singapore, it is primarily girls who miss out on education and training opportunities, as well as income-generating activities (figure 6). Furthermore, women aged 25–54 who have childcare responsibilities consistently have lower employment rates compared to men (figure 7). These gender gaps widen when women are responsible for caring for children under the age of 6. To ensure inclusivity and leave no one behind, it is crucial to pay specific attention to single women, especially sole parents of young children. This cohort faces increased vulnerability as their employment opportunities are limited by their caregiving responsibilities and they likely must rely on a single source of income.

FIGURE 6.

Proportion of youth (aged 15–24) not in education, employment, or training, by sex, latest year (percentage)



Source: SDG Global Database.

FIGURE 7.

Prime-age (25–54 years) employment-to-population ratio by sex, household type and presence of children, latest year (percentage)

○ Women ○ Men

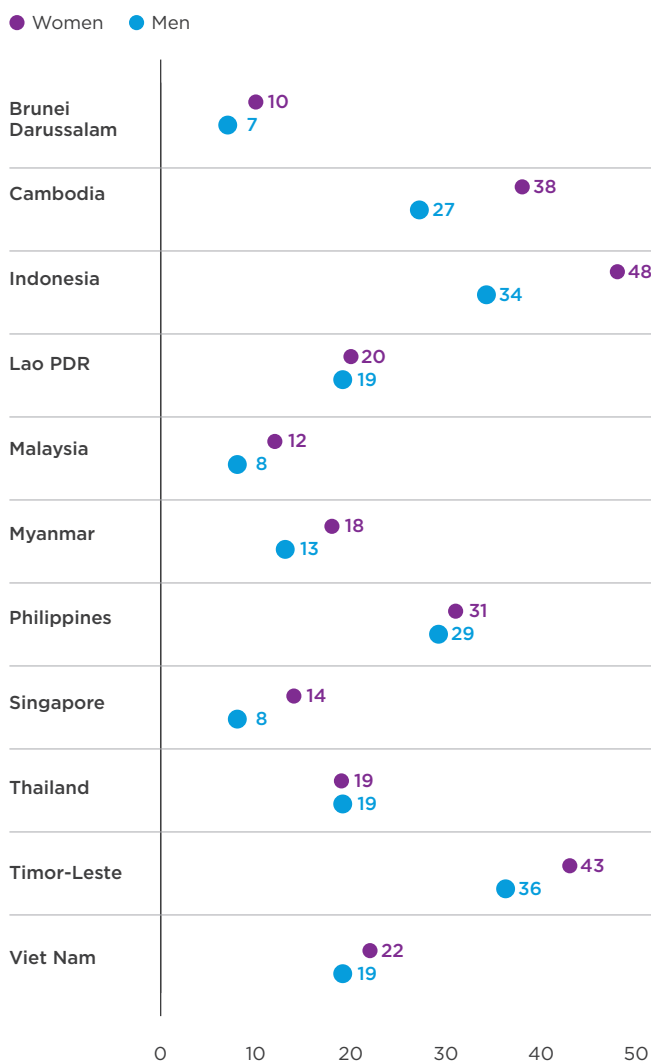


Source: UN DESA Gender Data Hub.

Women have limited access to the labour market, even when more women than men are available to work, would like to work more hours or are seeking work.

The unequal distribution of care work can limit women's ability to participate in formal employment and career

FIGURE 8.
Proportion of people in employment working part-time, by sex, latest year (percentage)

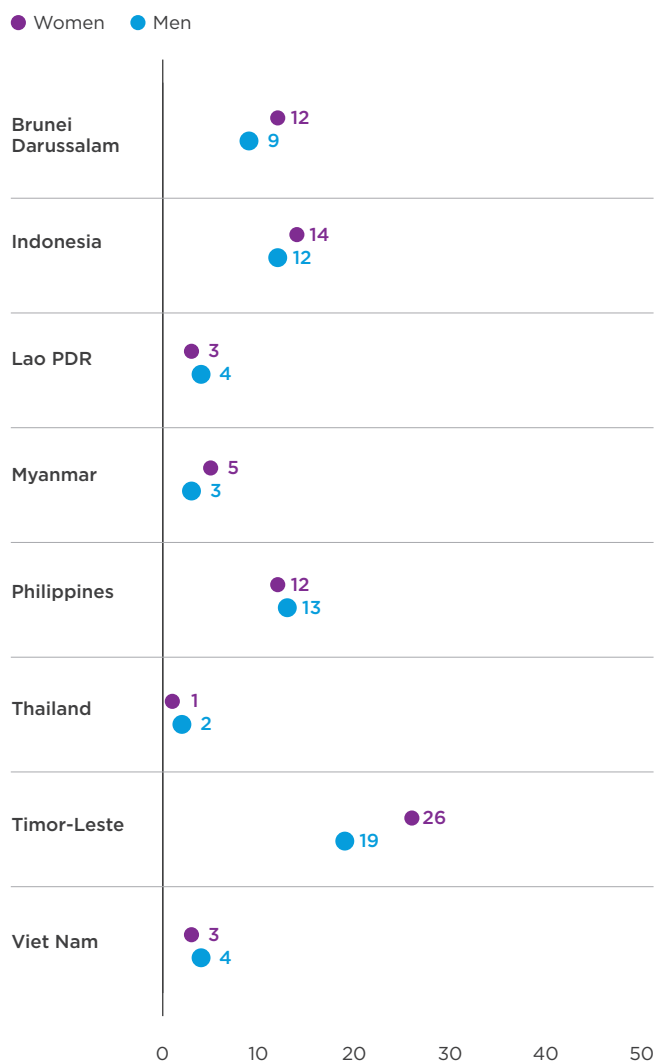


Source: UN DESA Gender Data Hub.

The prevalence of women workers in care employment reflects societal norms that align caregiving roles with female labour.

advancement. When women choose part-time jobs, lower-paying positions, or even leave the workforce entirely to meet household care demands their income, career progression and retirement benefits are negatively affected. In the ASEAN region, more women than men engage in part-time work (figure 8) and/or are in positions that do not provide the desired or necessary number of working hours to meet their financial or career objectives (figure 9).

FIGURE 9.
Composite rate of labour underutilization, by sex, latest year (percentage)



Notes: The indicator reflects the proportion of persons in time-related underemployment, unemployment and potential labour force over the extended labour force. Source: ILOSTAT.

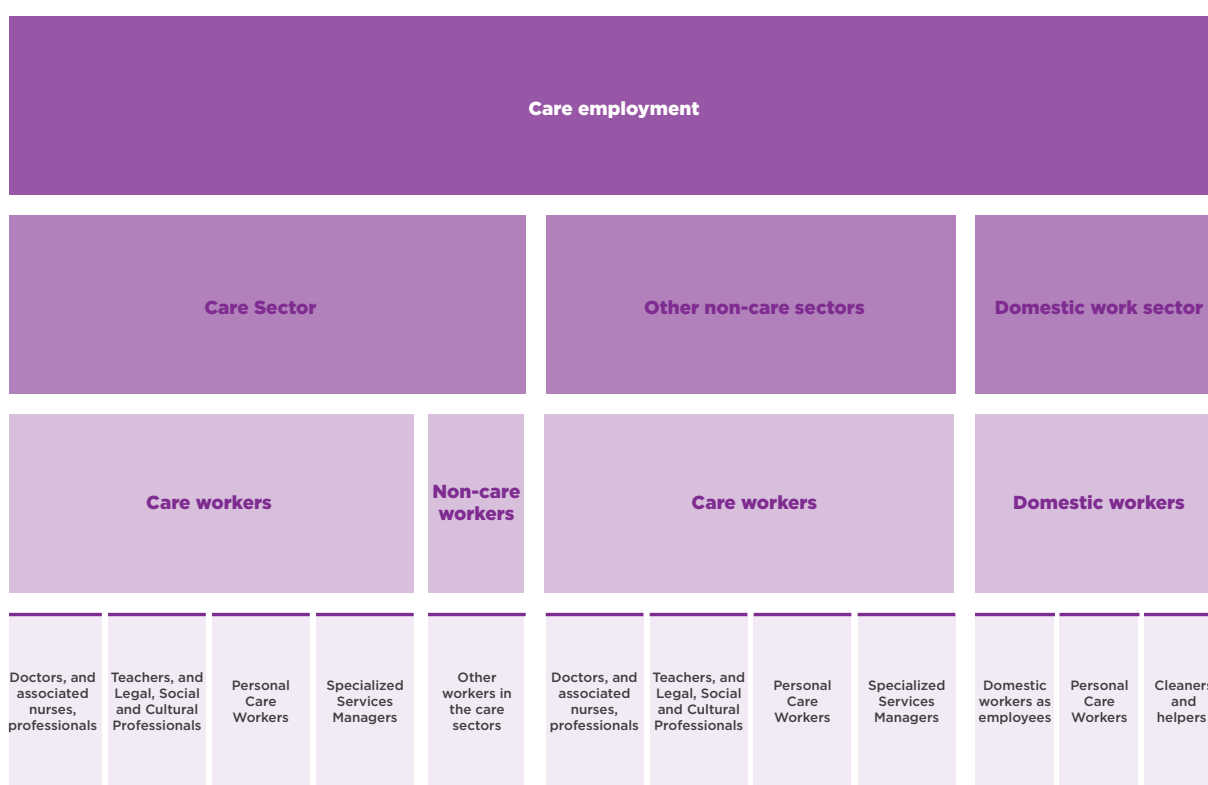
In the ASEAN region, a noticeable proportion of women are in care employment (figure 10), reflecting prevailing gender norms that link women to care jobs as well as traditional gender roles within the economy. For example, in Brunei Darussalam, 8 per cent of women work as domestic workers while 0 per cent of men are employed in such occupations.

BOX 1.

Scope of care employment in the International Labour Organization experimental series

Given the lack of an international agreed definition for care employment, the International Labour Organization (ILO) experimental series offers valuable insights into the nature of care employment and its characteristics. These estimates refer to care work performed for payment within various settings, including private households (e.g. domestic workers), communities and both public and private hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, schools and other care or support establishments.¹⁴ Care workers may have an employment relationship with a private household, a public agency, a for-profit business or a non-profit organization, or they may be self-employed. However, it is important to note that the current ILO definition of care employment only includes domestic workers who are in an employment relationship with a household. As a result, this definition undercounts this group of workers.

Schematic representation of the scope of care employment in the ILO experimental series



Notes: The care sector includes education; human health activities, residential care activities and social work activities without accommodation.

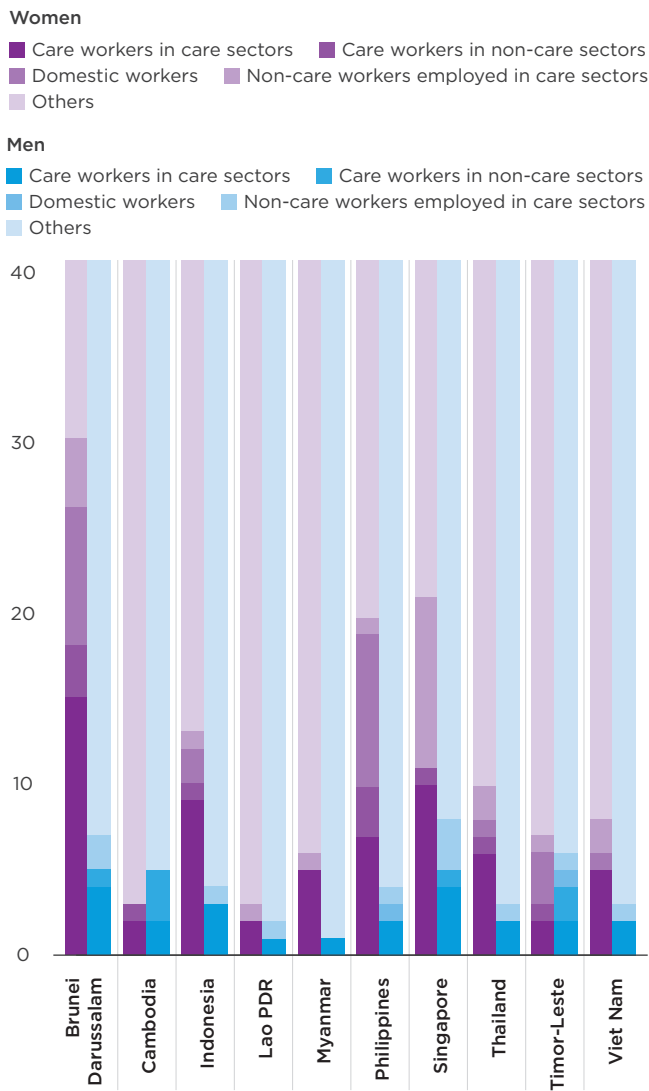
Source: Authors' elaboration based on [concepts and definitions available on ILOSTAT](#).

Except for the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Timor-Leste, care employment is predominantly an urban phenomenon (figure 11). Better access to health-care facilities and infrastructure as well as care-related services may explain geographical disparities, but care services should be expanded in rural areas so that women and girls are not left behind. Moreover, in the ASEAN region, more single, widowed, or divorced

women work in care jobs compared to men (figure 12). This may be explained by economic factors, such as the necessity to remain in or seek employment in caregiving roles. In Myanmar and Thailand, where a significant number of women workers in care employment are single, widowed, or divorced, there may be few other employment opportunities or the care economy may reflect migration patterns.

FIGURE 10.

Proportion of workers in care employment, by sex and care worker type, latest year (percentage)



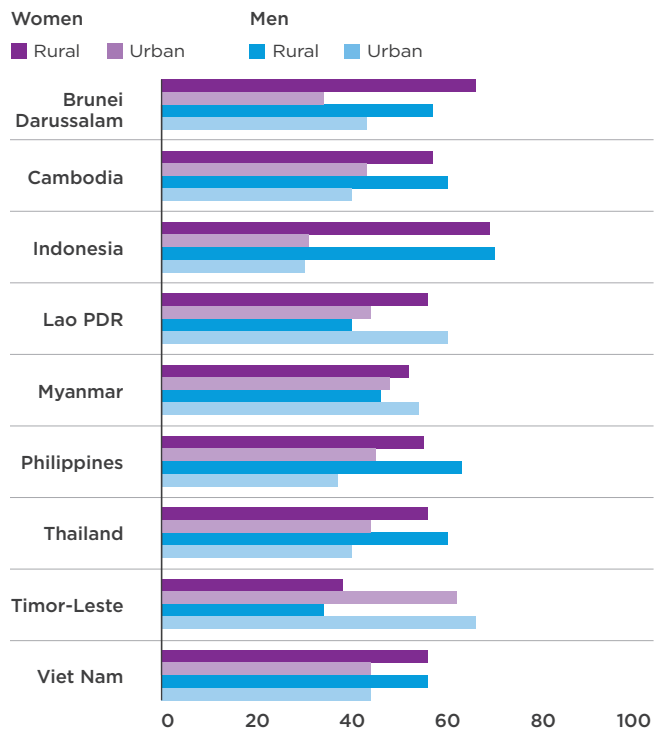
Source: Authors' elaboration based on ILOSTAT data.

Caregiving, though skill-intensive, is often undervalued and rarely recognized as professional experience.

The scope of care employment encompasses jobs that require a minimum level of education or intermediate education. This highlights the need for mid-level technical or vocational education in the care field. Additionally, specialized training or education is crucial. Yet, there are significant gender gaps in the highest level of education, with men being more prevalent than women in five of the nine countries in the region with available data. This suggests that men are more likely to hold higher professional roles in care economy (figure 13).

FIGURE 11.

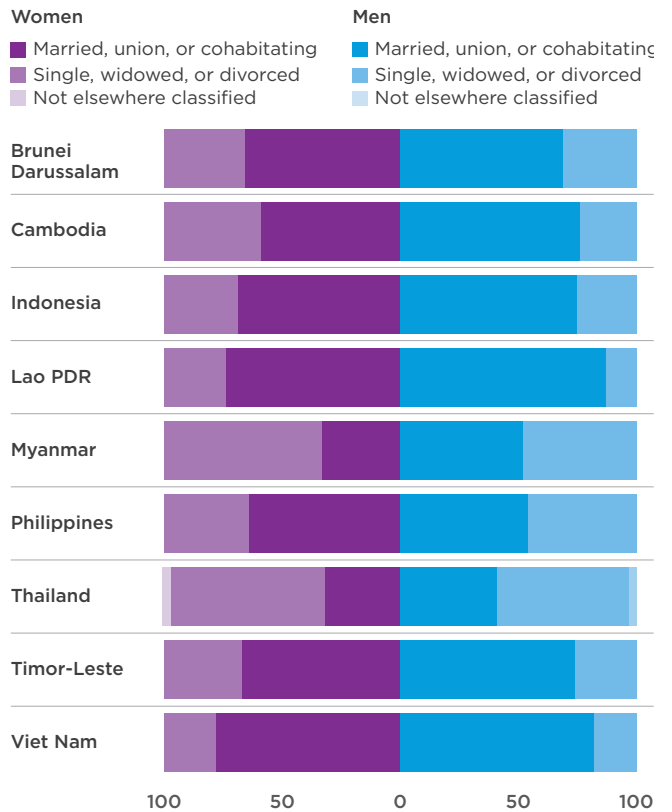
Proportion of workers in care employment, by sex and location, latest year (percentage)



Source: Authors' elaboration based on ILOSTAT data.

FIGURE 12.

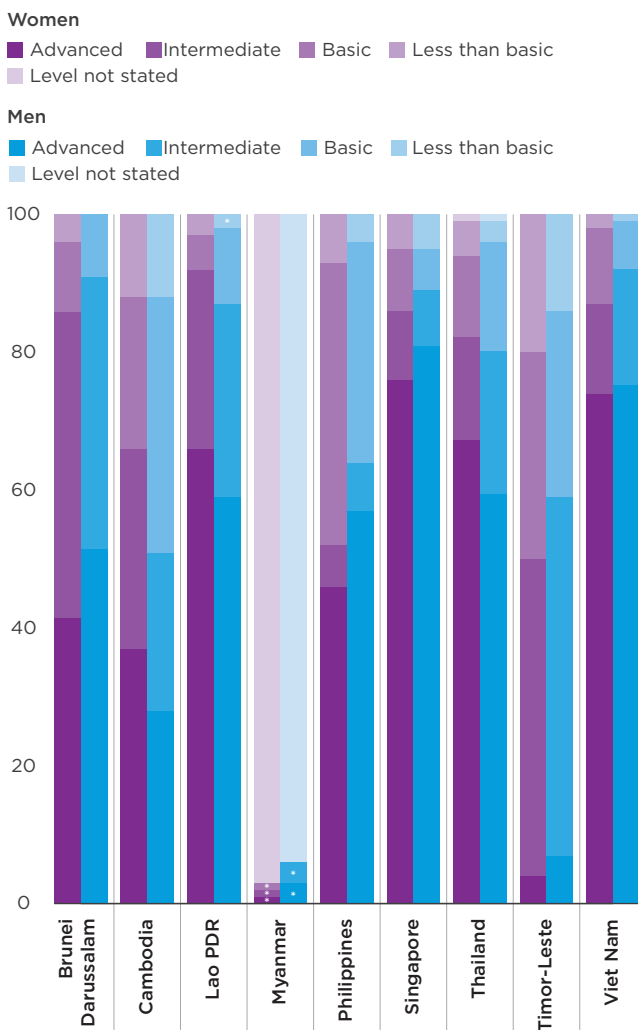
Proportion of workers in care employment, by sex and marital status, latest year (percentage)



Source: Authors' elaboration based on ILOSTAT data.

FIGURE 13.

Proportion of workers in care employment, by sex and education, latest year (percentage)



Note: *Estimates should be interpreted with caution due to unreliable values.
Source: Authors' elaboration based on ILOSTAT data.

Occupational segregation is at play in the highly feminized care economy, with more women nurses compared to men.

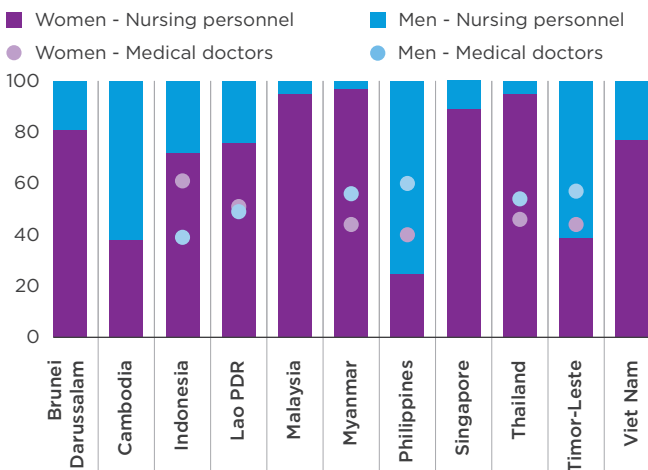
The care economy shows clear occupational segregation, with women making up the majority in nursing roles but being underrepresented in specialized medical positions. Except for Cambodia, the Philippines and Timor-Leste, the noticeable gender disparity in nursing professions across the region favour women, with Myanmar having the highest recorded value at 97 per cent (figure 14). As shown in figure 15, while both men and women are generally more likely to find care employment in the public sector rather than the private sector, in the Philippines and Singapore the proportion of women employed in the private sector is higher. This may indicate that women are more likely to rely on private institutions, such as households, as sources of employment opportunities in the care economy. However, men have a strong presence in the public sector, suggesting potential barriers for women in terms of entry or career advancement within public care institutions (figure 15).

Decent working conditions and equal pay for work of equal value are needed to protect women in care employment.

Care workers in ASEAN would benefit from a range of protections – including health insurance, retirement plans, unemployment benefits and adequate workers' compensation – to address the financial risks associated with illness, job loss and workplace injuries (figure 16).

FIGURE 14.

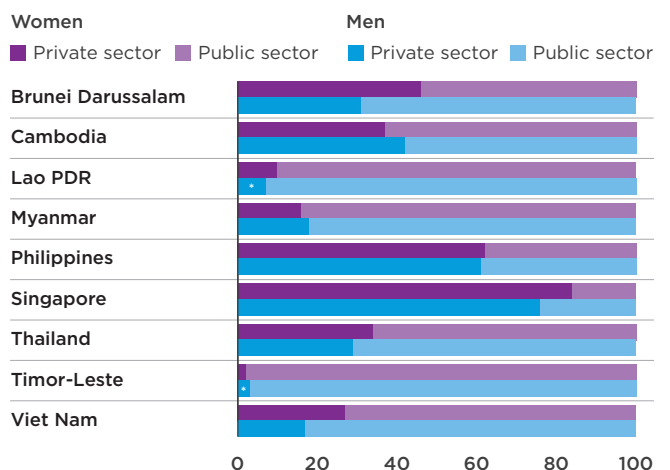
Proportion of health workers, by sex and type of occupation, latest year (percentage)



Source: SDG Global Database.

FIGURE 15.

Proportion of workers in care employment, by sex and institutional sector, latest year (percentage)



Note: *Estimates should be interpreted with caution due to unreliable values.
Source: Authors' elaboration based on ILOSTAT data.

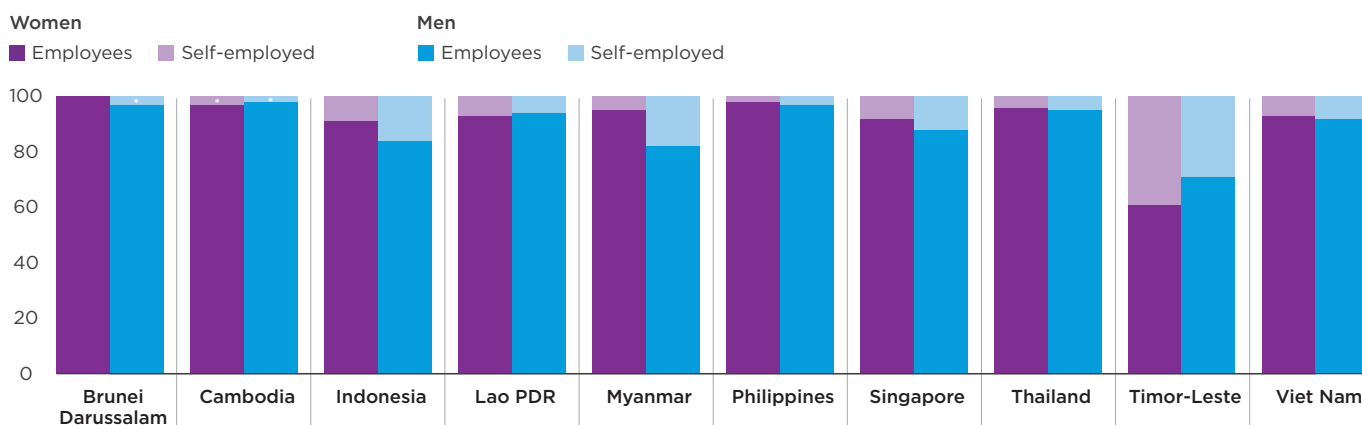
However, labour laws in many countries withhold social protection from some occupations in the care economy. As a result, **many care workers find themselves in informal employment**, with women and girls being particularly disadvantaged in the ASEAN region (figure 17). For example, in Cambodia, Indonesia and Thailand, more than half of women care workers are in informal employment. In addition to limited access to social protection, women also face other decent work deficits, such as a gender pay gap. Available data from nine ASEAN countries show that

women earn less than men, with the exception of Cambodia and Timor-Leste (figure 18). Women workers in the care economy in the ASEAN region are more likely than men to work part-time (figure 19), and it is a challenge to earn a decent income.

A LACK OF DECENT WORK PLAGUES THE CARE ECONOMY IN THE ASEAN REGION, WITH WOMEN HOLDING MOST OF THE INFORMAL CARE JOBS.

FIGURE 16.

Proportion of workers in care employment, by sex and status in employment, latest year (percentage)



Note: *Estimates should be interpreted with caution due to unreliable values.
Source: Authors' elaboration based on ILOSTAT data.

FIGURE 17.

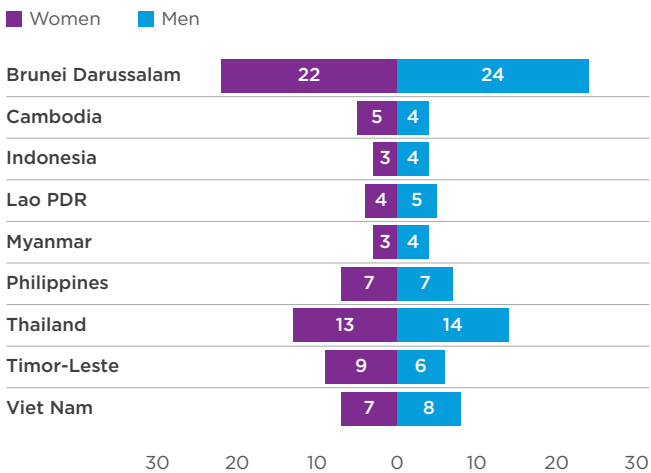
Proportion of care workers in informal employment, by sex, latest year (percentage)



Source: ILOSTAT.

FIGURE 18.

Average hourly earnings of care employees, by sex, latest year (PPP United States dollars)



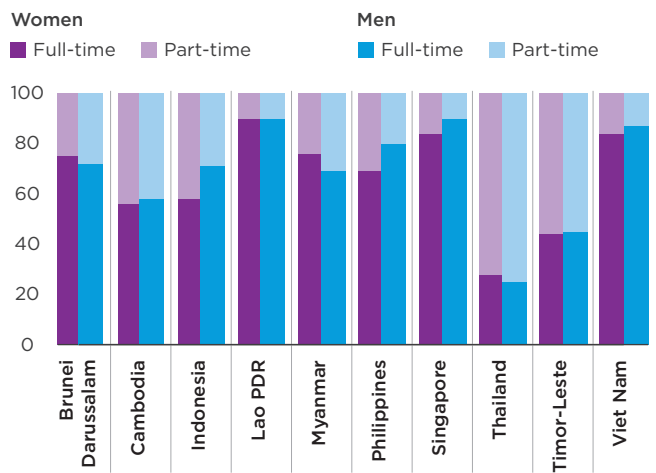
Source: ILOSTAT.

There is an urgent need to enhance legal frameworks to promote gender equality in the workplace to avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes and discrimination within care provision and beyond.

Enhanced legal frameworks that promote and enforce gender equality in the workplace, encompassing family-friendly workplace policies, such as maternity, paternity and parental leave, are the foundations of comprehensive care systems. This not only upholds the economic empowerment of women and girls but also bolsters inclusive economic growth by expanding the workforce. Notably, economies that offer extended paid parental leave witness higher rates of women’s workforce participation, which aligns with higher gross domestic product (GDP) growth rates. In South-East Asia, eight countries have established legal frameworks that prohibit the termination of employment for pregnant workers (figure 20). This legal protection ensures job security for pregnant workers during a crucial period in their lives, safeguarding their economic stability and preventing workplace discrimination. Three countries in the region have yet to implement these legal protections. This is likely to result in a lower women’s workforce participation rate and reduced financial stability, making it more difficult for women to access sufficient prenatal and postnatal care. Ultimately, the lack of legal protections reduces overall economic progress and stability.

FIGURE 19.

Proportion of workers in care employment, by sex and working time arrangement, latest year (percentage)



Source: Authors’ elaboration based on ILOSTAT data.

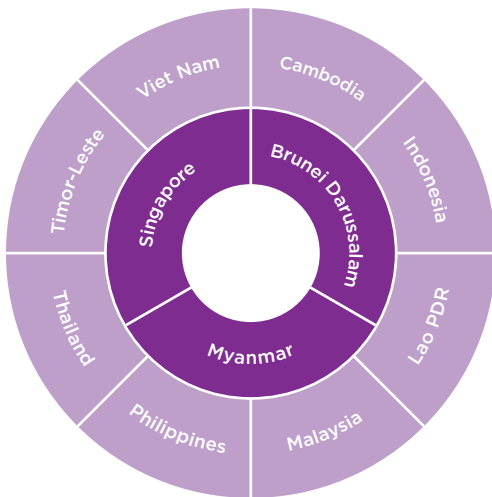
The duration of paid parental leave for mothers and fathers provides insights into gender disparities. Among countries in the ASEAN region, the length of paid maternity leave varies significantly. Viet Nam offers the longest maternity leave at 180 days, while Singapore and Timor-Leste offer the shortest at 84 days. Paid paternity leave is significantly shorter compared to maternity leave in each country, with Myanmar offering the longest paternity leave at 21 days (figure 21). The discrepancy in parental leave reflects and perpetuates discriminatory norms that place child-rearing responsibilities primarily with mothers. Such norms hinder the development of stronger bonds between children and both parents. Therefore, policy advocacy is necessary to promote a more equitable allocation of leave to support the equitable distribution of parental responsibilities and sustained participation of women in the workforce.

Higher wage compensation during maternity leave can improve workforce retention rates among women after child-birth, thus promoting gender equality in the workplace. Additionally, factoring in periods of childcare when calculating pension benefits can have a significant impact on long-term financial security. This ensures that workers who take time off for family obligations are not disadvantaged later in life. In South-East Asia, most countries guarantee payment of at least 66.6 per cent of wages during maternity leave (figure 22). However, fewer countries consider childcare periods when calculating pension benefits (figure 23). Improved pension entitlements for parents, primarily women who are more likely to take time off for childcare, are necessary.

FIGURE 20.

Dismissal of pregnant workers is prohibited, latest year

● Prohibited ● Not prohibited

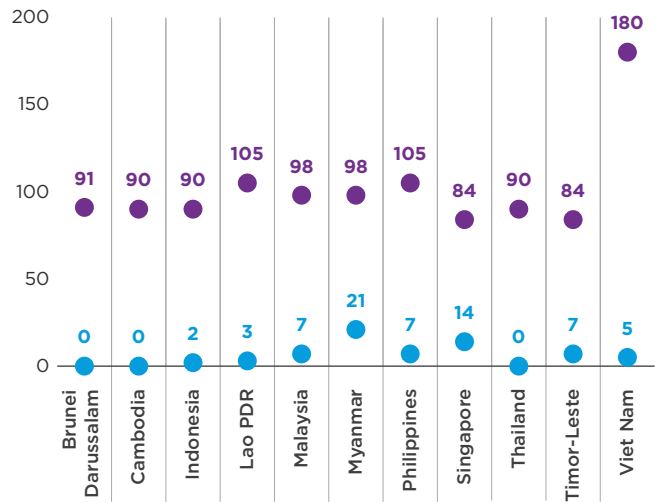


Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.

FIGURE 21.

Length of paid parental leave, by sex, latest year (calendar days)

● Maternity leave ● Paternity leave

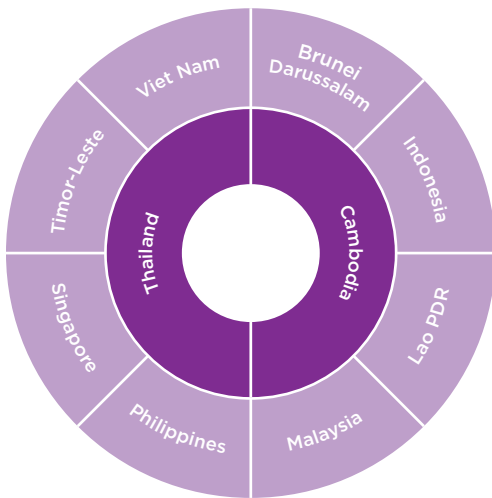


Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.

FIGURE 22.

Percentage of wages paid during maternity leave, latest year

● At least 66.6% ● Less than 66.6%



Source: UN DESA Gender Data Hub.

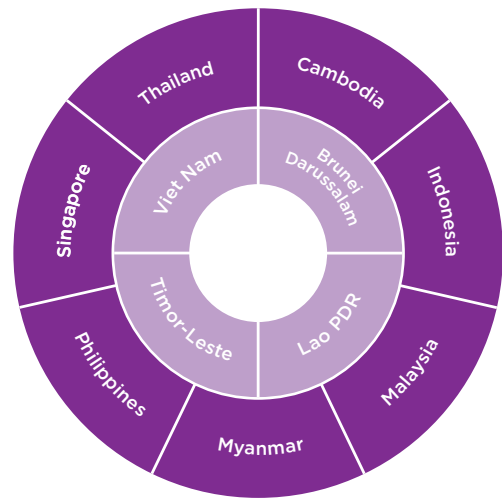
ASEAN Member States have not yet ratified ILO Convention No. 156 on Workers with Family Responsibilities.

The ratification of conventions, such as ILO Convention No. 156 on Workers with Family Responsibilities, and the implementation of equitable laws across genders demonstrate a commitment to inclusive policy decision-making. The commitment to inclusivity cultivates a stronger, more diverse and resilient economy that is

FIGURE 23.

Periods of absence due to childcare accounted for in pension benefits, latest year

● Periods of absence ● No periods of absence



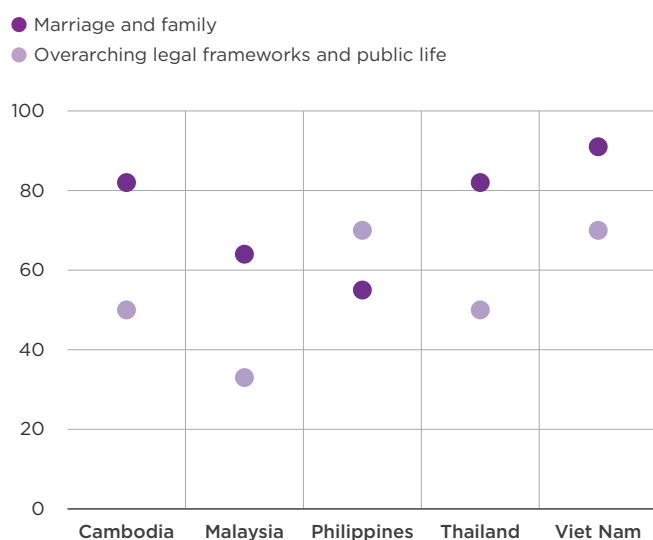
Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.

better equipped to absorb economic shocks. Recognizing and improving working conditions and compensation in highly feminized sectors, such as the care economy, can help address economic inequalities and empower women in the workforce. While enhancing regulatory frameworks to improve the working conditions in the care economy is crucial to achieve broader economic stability and gender equality, the Philippines is the only country in the region that has ratified the ILO Convention No. 189 on Domestic Workers.

The assignment of reproductive roles, along with the unequal distribution of resources and other structural barriers, leads to limited prospects for women and girls to fully realize their potential in the labour market.

Although countries in the ASEAN region have made significant progress in developing legal frameworks to promote, enforce and monitor gender equality in marriage and family, gender disparities remain. As shown in figure 24, only three out of five countries in the region have scores of 80 or higher on an assessment of gender equality in their legal framework on marriage and family. However, when it comes to overall legal frameworks, the progress is not as promising, as no country has achieved a score higher than 70.

FIGURE 24.
Legal frameworks that promote, enforce and monitor gender equality, latest year

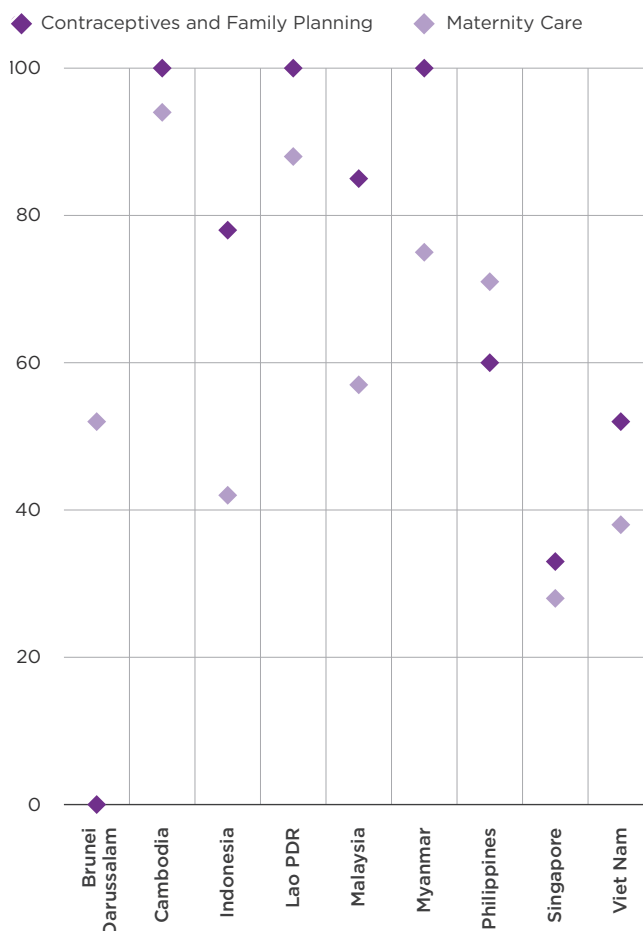


Note: Scores range from 0 to 100, with 100 indicating adherence to best practices across all questions. "Marriage and family" assesses whether the minimum age of marriage is at least 18 without legal exceptions, equal rights to enter marriage and initiate divorce, to be the legal guardian of children during and after marriage, to be recognized as head of household or head of the family, to choose where to live, to choose a profession, to obtain an identity card, to apply for passports, to choose a profession, and to own, access and control marital property. It also assesses whether marriage under the legal age is void or voidable, and the establishment of dedicated and specialized family courts. "Overarching legal framework and public life" assesses whether customary and personal laws are invalid if they violate constitutional provisions on equality or non-discrimination, prohibition of both direct and indirect discrimination against women, equal rights and access to hold public and political office, quotas for women in national parliament, equal rights to confer citizenship to spouses and children, establishment of a specialized independent body to receive complaints on gender discrimination, mandated legal aid in criminal and civil/family matters, equal evidentiary weight for women's testimony in court, existence of laws requiring the production and dissemination of gender statistics, and sanctions or incentives related to mandated candidate list quotas.

Source: SDG Global Database.

Enhancing access to health-care services can have a profound impact on community health and contribute to long-term cost reduction for governments. Achieving this goal requires legislation that guarantees equal access to sexual and reproductive health care, however, significant discrepancies exist in South-East Asia. While countries such as Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar have legal frameworks that safeguard reproductive rights, other countries have limited regulations in place. Gaps in legal frameworks may impede progress towards health and gender equality goals. Inadequate legal coverage of maternity care in Indonesia, Singapore and Viet Nam (figure 25) can result in poorer health outcomes for both mothers and children, and exacerbate gender disparities in health-care access. Overall, it is essential to ensure that legal frameworks are supported by strong implementation mechanisms requiring adequate investments in care infrastructure.

FIGURE 25.
Laws and regulations guarantee full and equal access of women and men to contraceptives, family planning and maternity care, latest year (percentage)



Note: Data refers to Section 1. Maternity Care and Section 2. Contraceptive and Family Planning of SDG 5.6.2.

Source: SDG Global Database.

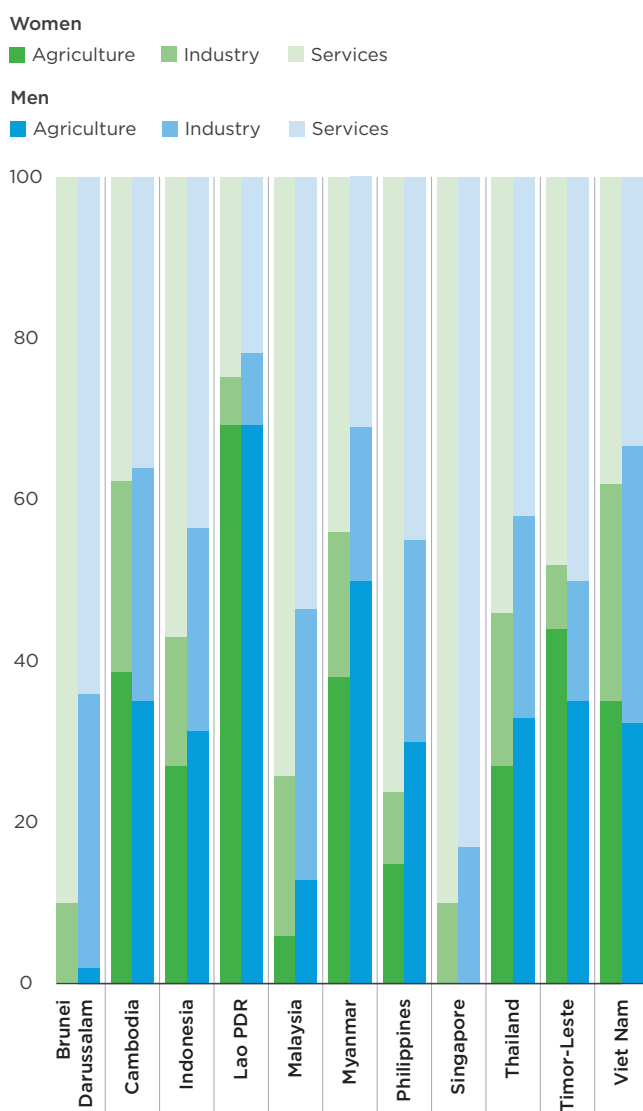
WOMEN AND THE WORLD OF WORK

Structural drivers of gender inequality, such as economic and societal dependence on women’s unpaid care work, results in significant inequality of economic opportunity for women and girls. In the ASEAN region, there is untapped potential, as women’s participation in the labour force consistently falls behind that of men.¹⁵ However, gender inequality in the world of work extends beyond participation and includes important disparities in working conditions. In the region, a larger proportion of women engaged in low-skilled jobs in low-pay sectors, such as

agriculture, compared to men and boys (figure 26). Gender pay gaps continue to be a key feature in the labour markets of the ASEAN region (figure 27). Disparities are particularly pronounced in average hourly earnings in professional roles and trades. In some countries, even in sectors with lower wages that employ a large proportion of women, such as agriculture, women earn less than men for work of equal value. In addition, informality affects labour markets across sectors (figure 28).

FIGURE 26.

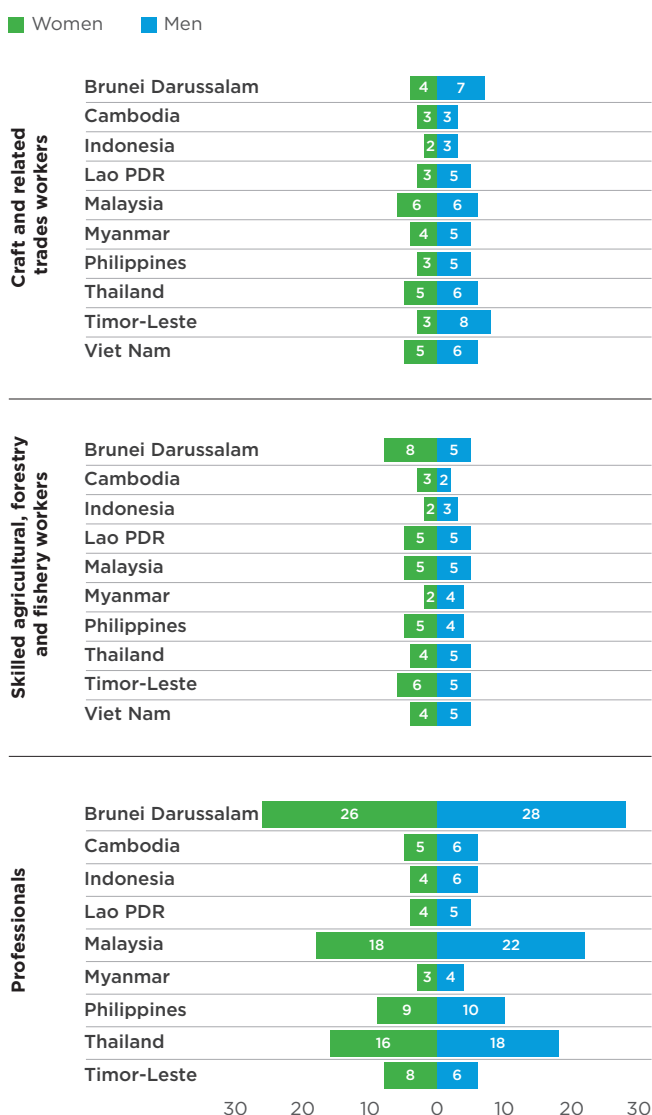
Proportion of population in employment, by sex and sector, latest year (percentage)



Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.

FIGURE 27.

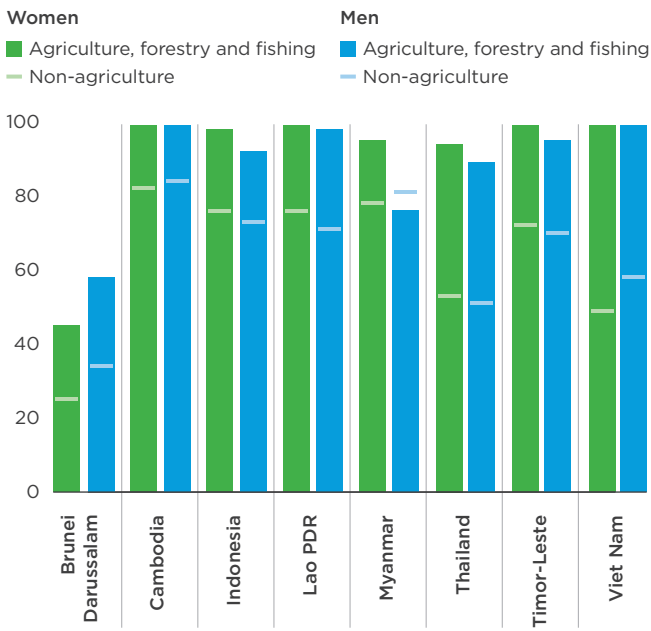
Average hourly earnings, by sex and selected occupations, latest year (PPP in United States dollars)



Source: ILOSTAT

FIGURE 28.

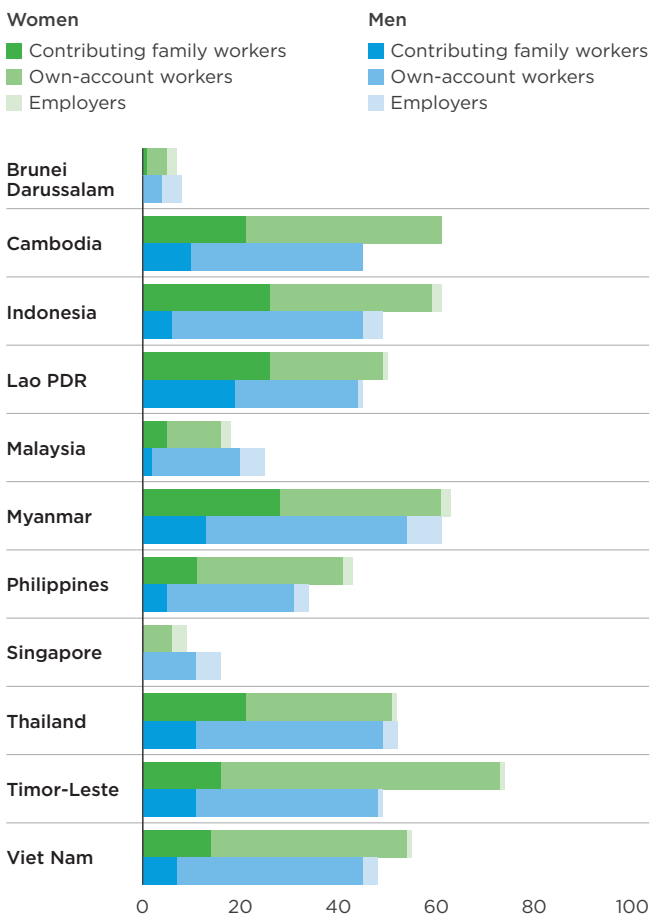
Proportion of informal employment, by sex and sector, latest year (percentage)



Source: SDG Global Database.

FIGURE 29.

Proportion of employed, by sex and status in self-employment, latest year (percentage)

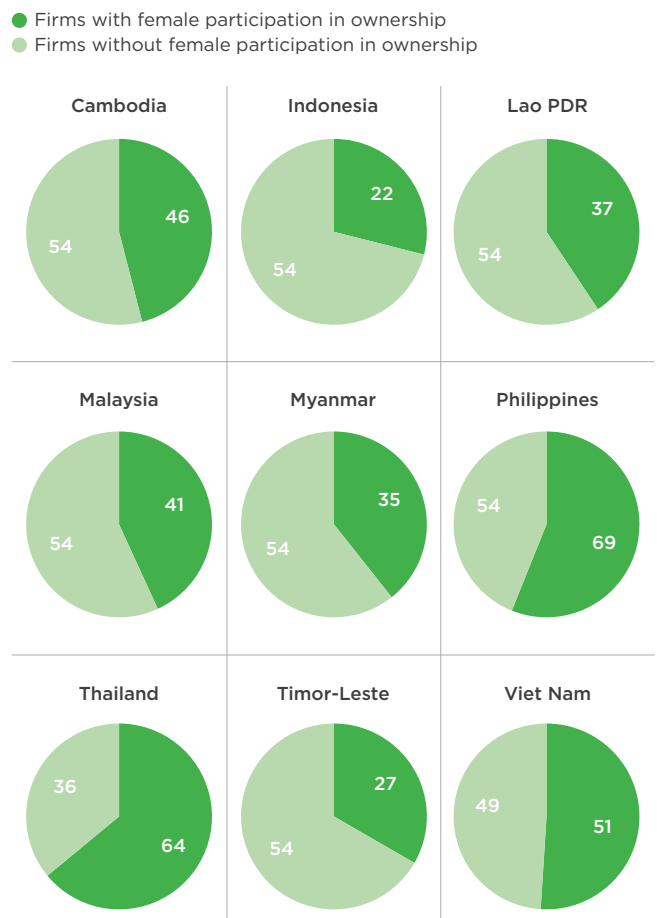


Source: UN DESA Gender Data Hub.

Moreover, in ASEAN, women predominantly participate in the labour market through vulnerable employment (figure 29). As own-account workers or contributing family workers, they face lower job security, insufficient income and limited social protection. Despite women and men having equal legal rights to register a business, enterprises with female participation in ownership are a lower share compared to those owned by men (figure 30). Among countries in the ASEAN region with available data, only three have a higher percentage of firms with female participation in ownership, highlighting that women still face significant barriers as business owners. These systemic obstacles not only hinder economic growth, but also lead to inefficiencies in the labour market, reduce competition and innovation, and hinder progress towards achieving gender equality and women’s economic empowerment.

FIGURE 30.

Proportion of firms with female participation in ownership, latest year (percentage)

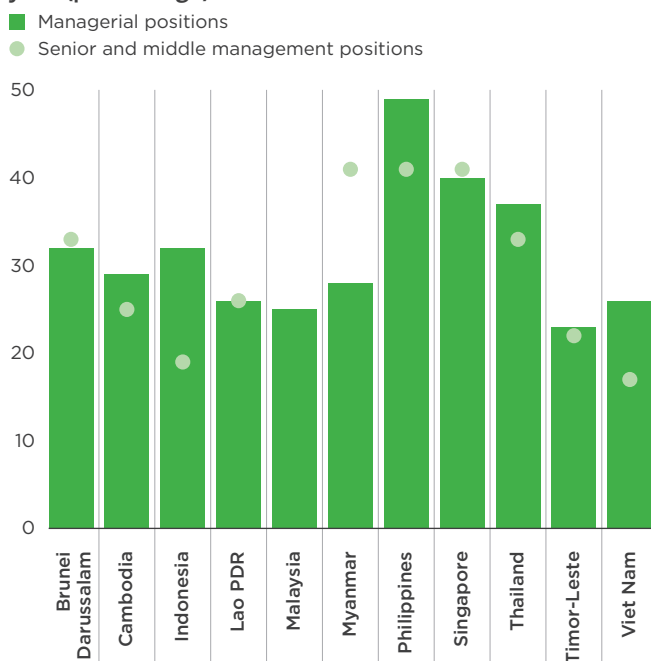


Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.

The limited opportunities for women workers hinder their ability to assume leadership roles, and managerial positions are more often held by men across the ASEAN region.

Gender disparities in corporate leadership persist throughout the ASEAN region, with women making up a minority of directors and managers at all levels. No country in the region has achieved gender parity in the proportion of women managers. In six countries, women account for less than 30 per cent. The representation of women in middle and senior management positions follows a similar trend, ranging from 41 per cent in Myanmar, the Philippines and Singapore to 17 per cent in Viet Nam (figure 31).

FIGURE 31.
Proportion of women (aged 15+) in managerial positions and senior and middle management positions, latest year (percentage)



Source: SDG Global Database.

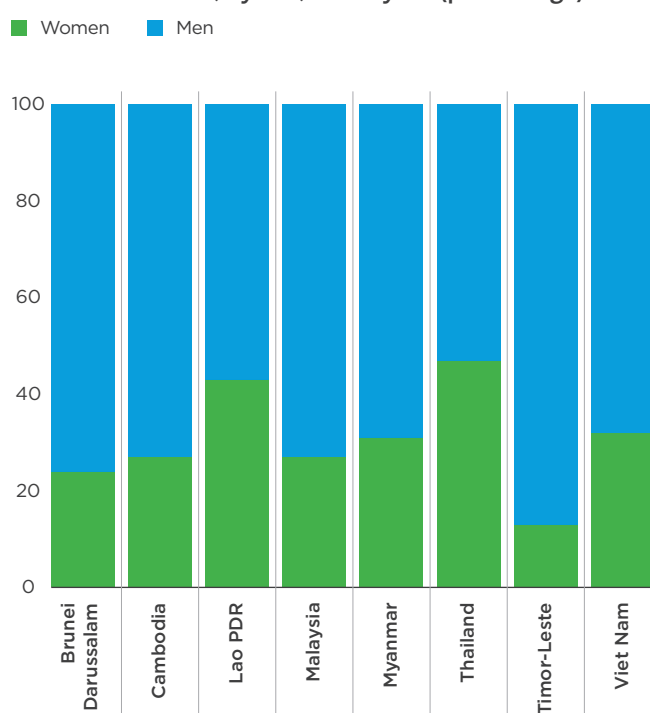
Women face structural challenges associated with ownership of assets, limited access to economic resources and credit required to start a business and transition into more stable and profitable entrepreneurship.



ACROSS THE 8 COUNTRIES WITH AVAILABLE DATA, NONE HAVE ACHIEVED GENDER EQUALITY IN THE PROPORTION OF WOMEN DIRECTORS IN NEWLY REGISTERED LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANIES.

Only two countries (Thailand and the Lao People’s Democratic Republic) have a share of women directors exceeding 40 per cent (figure 32). Addressing the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in South-East Asia requires concerted efforts to dismantle systemic barriers and foster inclusive workplace cultures. By prioritizing inclusivity in leadership, organizations can unlock the full potential of their workforce, drive sustainable growth and foster innovation.¹⁶

FIGURE 32.
Share of directors, by sex, latest year (percentage)



Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.

Women often lack the resources and opportunities for profitable entrepreneurial roles. Women entrepreneurs are less likely to have access to various financial services, resulting in a significant reliance on self-financing, which makes them more vulnerable to economic shocks.¹⁷ Access to and control over productive assets, as well as digital finance, are crucial factors in driving women’s entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship serves as an important avenue for women’s empowerment and agency.¹⁸

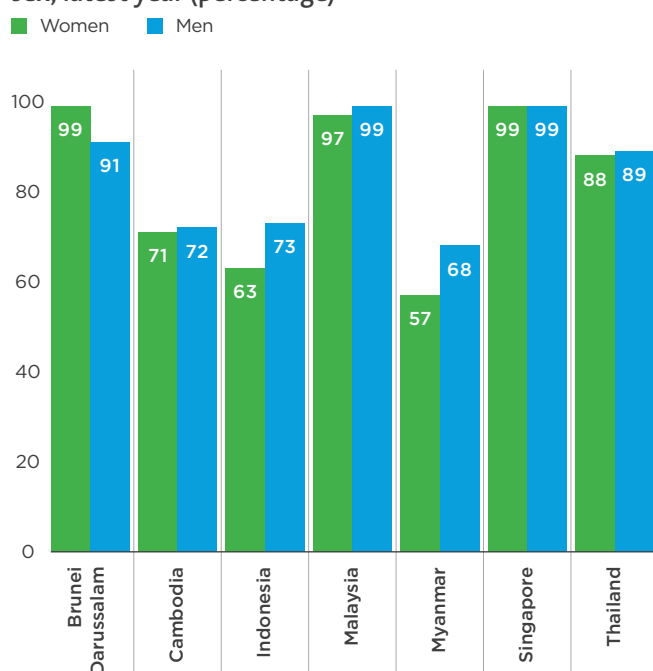
Digital technology has the potential to empower women by giving them control over and access to financial services and enabling them to manage risk, start or invest in businesses or fund expenditures.

The advent of digital financial services, such as those utilizing mobile phones or the Internet for financial transactions, is significantly changing lives by improving access to financial services for underserved populations.^{19,20} Digital financial services can help to bridge the gap in account ownership, increase women’s participation in the financial system and give women the opportunity to access credit, save formally and access a diversity of

financial services. Owning financial assets, such as mobile phones and debit/credit cards, is a crucial prerequisite for accessing digital financial services, making gender disparities in mobile ownership a significant barrier for women.²¹ Despite improvements in network coverage, data from seven countries in the region reveal that gender disparities in mobile phone ownership remain, with only the exception of Brunei Darussalam (figure 33). The largest gaps are observed in Indonesia and Myanmar where mobile phone ownership stands at 63 per cent and 57 per cent of women compared to 73 per cent and 68 per cent of men, respectively. The landscape in ownership of debit and credit card varies across the ASEAN region, with large gender gaps in debit and credit card ownership in the Philippines and Thailand (figure 34).

FIGURE 33.

Proportion of people who own a mobile telephone, by sex, latest year (percentage)



Source: SDG Global Database.

FIGURE 34.

Proportion of population (aged 15+) who own credit and debit card, by sex, latest year (percentage)



Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.

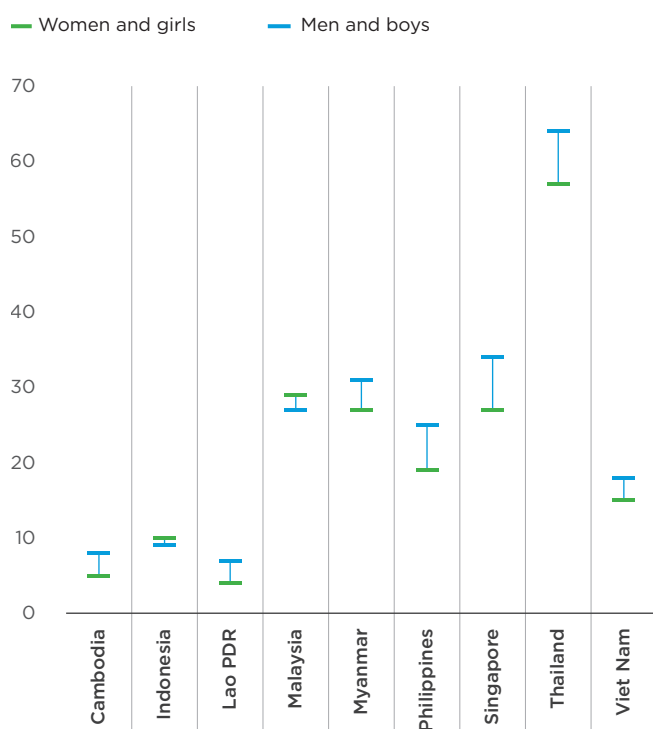
Increasing women’s access to digital financial services can generate opportunities for greater digital financial inclusion and inclusive growth in the ASEAN region.

In seven out of the nine countries with available data, women are still less likely than men to have a bank account

or a mobile money service account, except for Indonesia and the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (figure 35). Gender disparities in digital financial inclusion are also evident in the usage of mobile money accounts and digital payments. In the ASEAN region, fewer women than men use mobile phone technology for mobile money accounts and digital payments, with only a few exceptions (figure 36 and figure 37).

As the digital economy rapidly grows in the ASEAN region,^{22,23} mobile money banking offers opportunities to increase income and savings, strengthen financial resilience, reduce transaction costs through efficient and transparent systems and ultimately promote women's entrepreneurship.²⁴ However, due to existing gender disparities, not all women can benefit from the positive impact of digitalization. Gender gaps in asset ownership result in women having less collateral to secure loans and other forms of credit, which restricts their ability to start businesses or invest in economic activities. Across the region, fewer women saved or borrowed money to start, operate, or expand a business, except for Myanmar and Viet Nam where the percentage of women and men who borrowed and saved for these purposes is equal at 16 per cent and 21 per cent, respectively. The Philippines has the highest percentage of women saving for business purposes (25 per cent), as well as a high percentage of men (27 per cent) (figure 38). Women face persistent challenges in accessing the necessary financial resources for entrepreneurial activities, which further contributes to their economic exclusion.

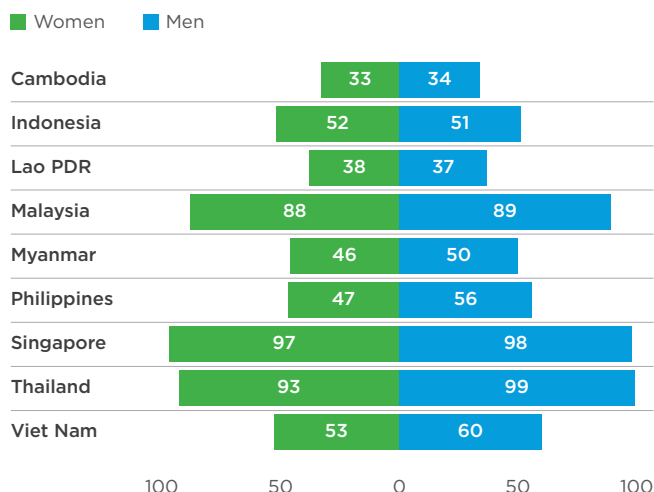
FIGURE 36.
Proportion of people (aged 15+) who used a mobile money account in the past year, by sex, latest year (percentage)



Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.

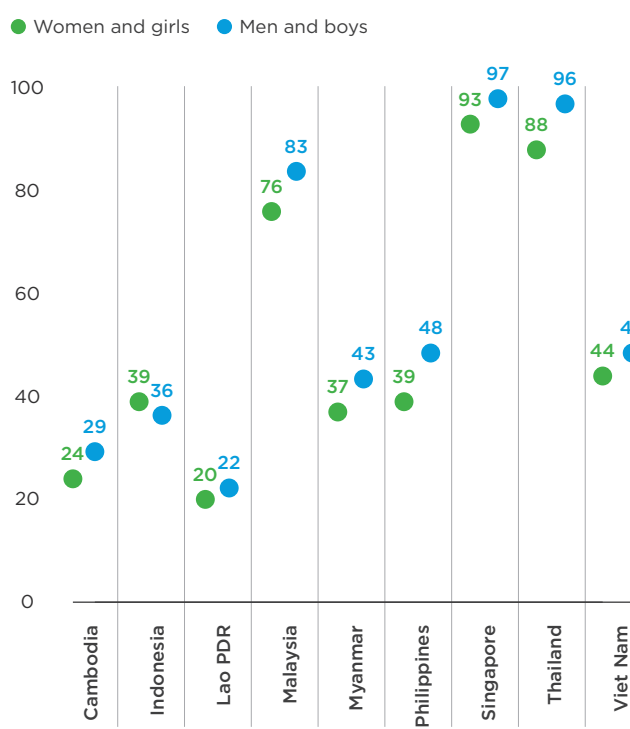
EQUAL ACCESS TO AND CONTROL OVER ASSETS AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES CAN ENHANCE WOMEN'S AUTONOMY, STRENGTHEN THEIR BARGAINING POWER AND ULTIMATELY ENABLE THEM TO HAVE A MORE SIGNIFICANT SAY IN DECISION-MAKING.

FIGURE 35.
Proportion of people (aged 15+) who own an account at a financial institution or with a mobile-money-service provider, by sex, latest year (percentage)



Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.

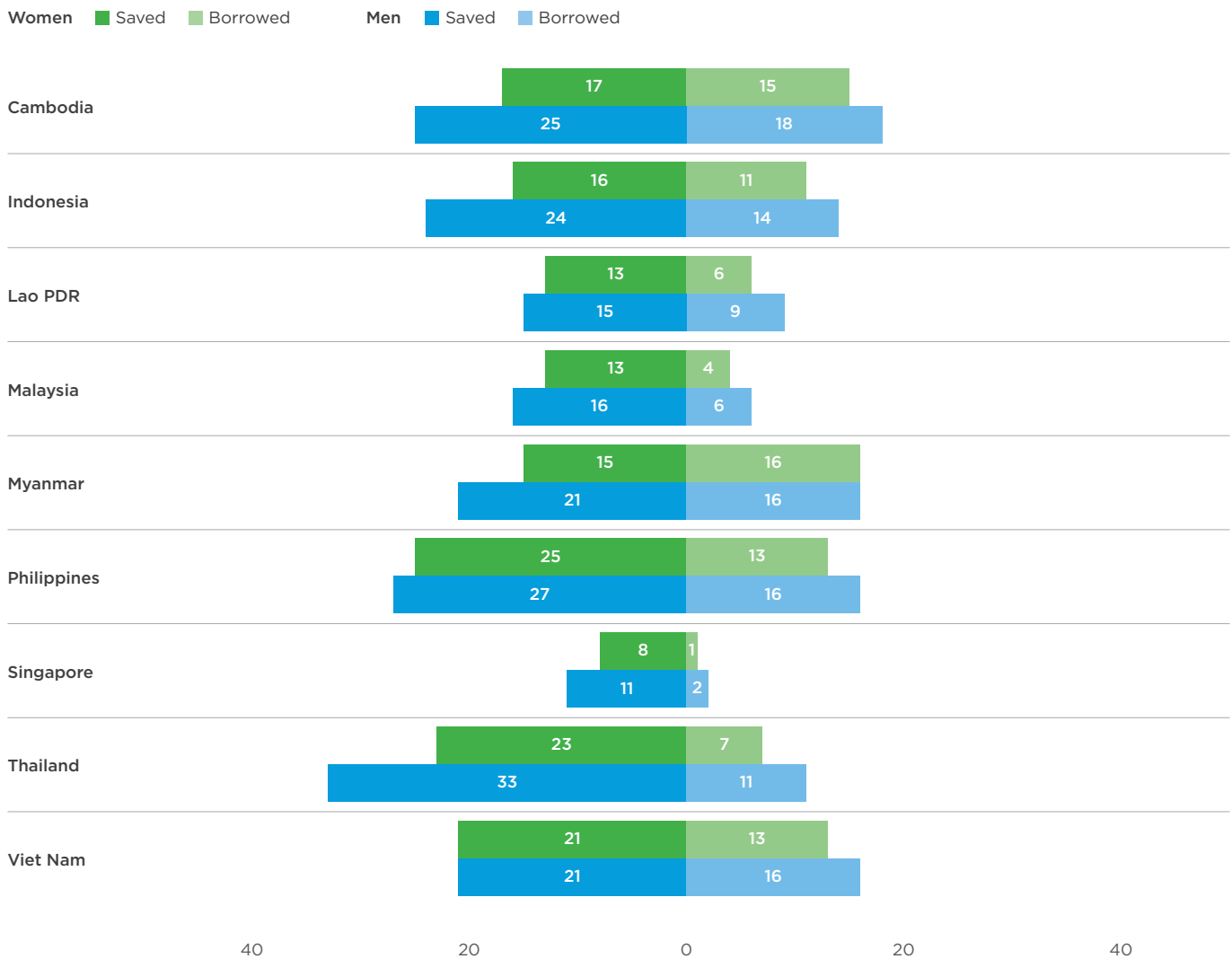
FIGURE 37.
Proportion of people (aged 15+) who made or received a digital payment in the past year, by sex, latest year (percentage)



Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.

FIGURE 38.

Proportion of people (aged 15+) who borrowed and saved to start, operate, or expand a farm or business, by sex, latest year (percentage)



Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.

Ensuring women’s access to productive assets and credit is crucial to enhance their economic independence and decision-making within society and unleash their economic potential.

Gender norms often restrict women’s access to assets with gender-blind inheritance laws and property rights that act as a structural driver of gender inequality and disempowerment.²⁵ Except for the Philippines, countries in the ASEAN region have legal provisions guaranteeing equal administrative authority over assets during marriage (figure 39). However, three countries in the region do not guarantee equal inheritance rights for widows and daughters (figure 40). Securing women’s rights to assets is crucial to improve

their overall well-being, reduce vulnerability to domestic violence, empower them within their families and communities and enhance their ability to engage in the economy.²⁶

Loans and credit can be instrumental in helping women to acquire productive assets. However, women often face difficulties accessing financial services due to the requirement of land and property as collateral.²⁷ Ensuring women’s access to credit is essential to enhance their opportunities to purchase property, start and expand businesses and ultimately improve their economic status. However, across the region, only four countries have laws that prohibit gender-based discrimination in access to credit (figure 41). Significant progress must be made towards creating an enabling environment for women’s entrepreneurship to thrive and contribute to economic growth and sustainable development.

FIGURE 39.

Legal provision for equal administrative authority over assets during marriage, latest year

- Equal administrative authority
- No equal administrative authority

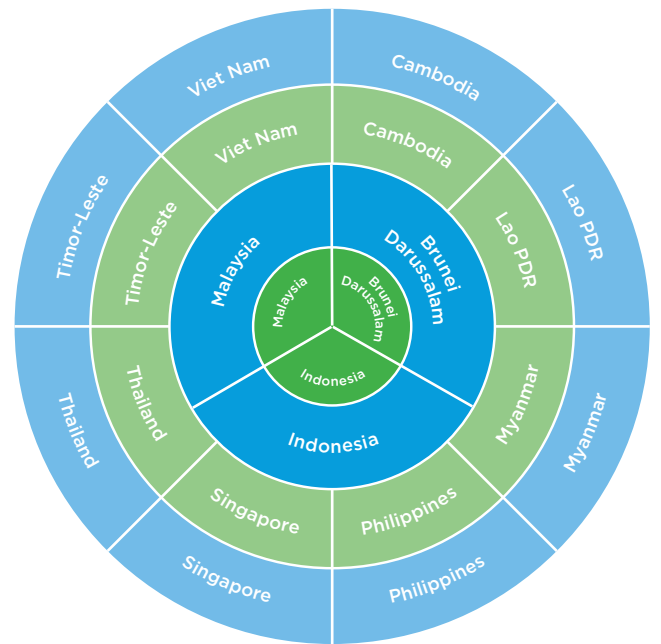


Source: World Bank Gender Portal.

FIGURE 40.

Legal protection of inheritance rights of daughters and widows, latest year

- Guarantees - Widows
- Does not guarantee - Widows
- Guarantees - Daughters
- Does not guarantee - Daughters

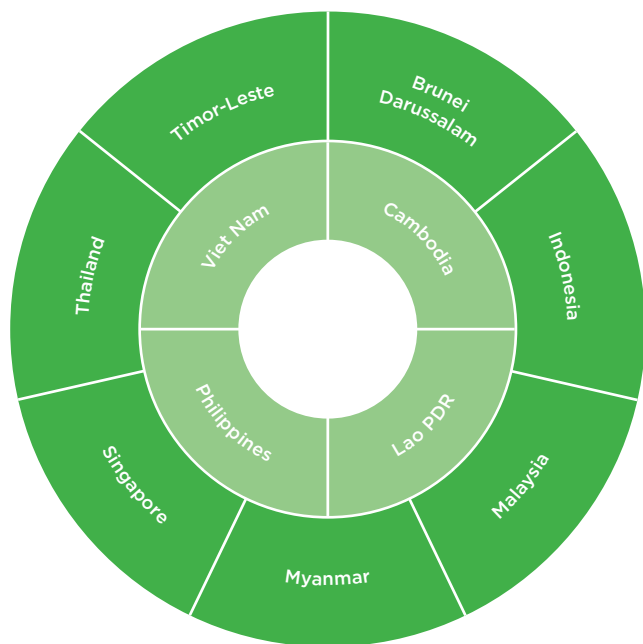


Source: UN DESA Gender Data

FIGURE 41.

Legal prohibition against discrimination in access to credit based on gender, latest year

- Prohibits
- Does not prohibit



Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal. Hub.

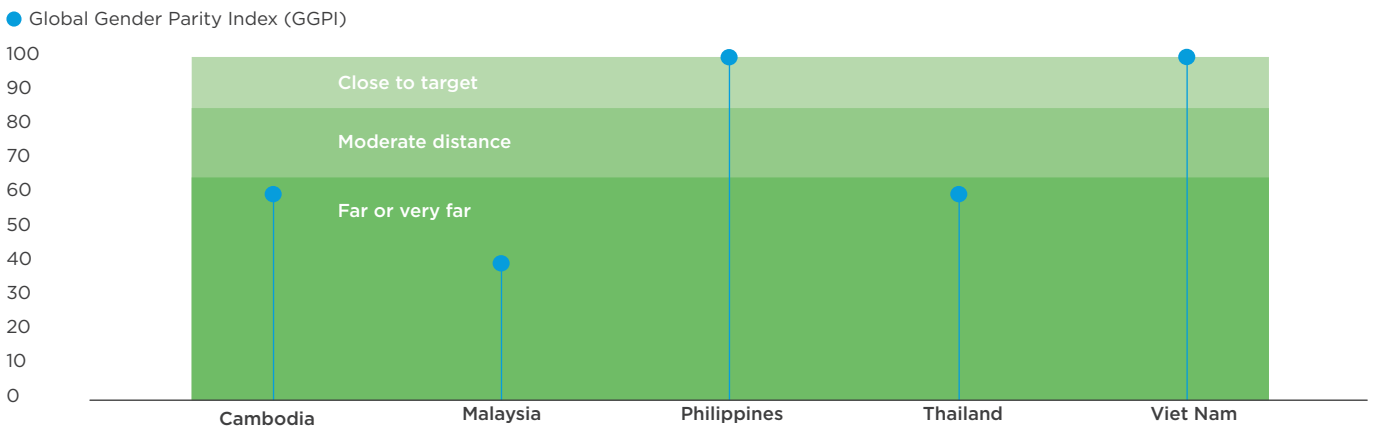
Improving women’s working conditions and compensation through gender-transformative legal frameworks is key to achieving economic equality, empowering women and promoting economic rights for all.

Addressing legal gaps is essential for fostering a supportive environment where women can thrive economically and have their economic rights safeguarded. This is crucial not only for closing gender gaps, supporting women’s participation in the labour market and enhancing their income security, but also for improving labour market outcomes and enhancing human capital formation.²⁸

Available data on legal frameworks that promote, enforce and monitor gender equality in employment shows that the Philippines and Viet Nam have met this target, with an achievement score of 100 per cent (figure 42). However, Cambodia, Malaysia and Thailand are still far or very far from reaching the target, with achievement scores lower than 65 per cent.

FIGURE 42.

Legal frameworks that promote, enforce and monitor gender equality in employment and economic benefits, latest year (percentage)



Note: The indicator measures government efforts to promote, enforce, and monitor gender equality in employment and economic benefits. It assesses non-discrimination based on gender in employment, equal pay for equal work, women’s access to hazardous or morally inappropriate jobs on an equal basis with men, women’s ability to work in the same industries and perform the same tasks as men, equal rights to work night hours, provisions for maternity and parental leave, establishment of a public entity to receive complaints on gender discrimination in employment, and provision of childcare services. Scores range from 0 to 100, with 100 indicating adherence to best practices across all questions. In this context, countries with a score of 85 per cent or above are considered close to the target, countries with a score between 65 per cent and 85 per cent are considered at a moderate distance from the target, and countries with a score below 65 per cent are considered far or very far from the target.

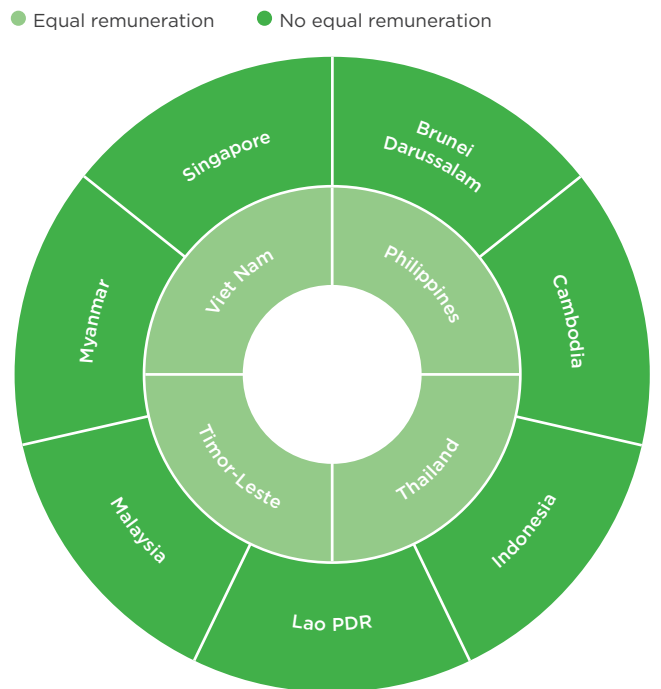
Source: SDG Global Database.

Slow progress in gender-transformative legal frameworks on employment illustrates the gaps that remain in implementation and enforcement of labour standards. In South-East Asia, many countries ratified ILO Convention No. 100 on equal remuneration and ILO Convention No. 111 on discrimination in employment. Nevertheless, laws mandating equal remuneration for work of equal value and prohibiting discrimination in employment based on gender are not uniformly in place. Only four countries have mandated equal remuneration for women and men for work of equal value (figure 43), while four countries do not prohibit discrimination in employment based on gender (figure 44).

Youth employment strategies need to be gender transformative to respond to structural drivers of gender inequality that affect women throughout the lifecycle. The existence of developed and operationalized national strategies for youth employment, either as a distinct strategy or as part of a national employment strategy, is crucial to addressing gender disparities in the labour market,

FIGURE 43.

Law mandates equal remuneration for women and men for work of equal value, latest year



Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.



ONLY 4 COUNTRIES IN THE ASEAN REGION HAVE LAWS MANDATING EQUAL REMUNERATION FOR WOMEN AND MEN FOR WORK OF EQUAL VALUE

FIGURE 44.

Law prohibits discrimination in employment based on gender, latest year

● Prohibits ● Does not prohibit



Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal.

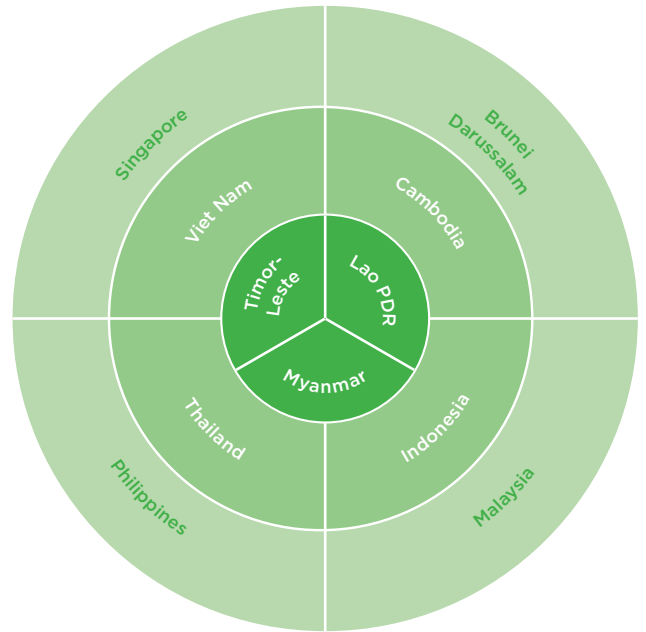
Women’s political representation is crucial to bring about the policy changes needed to advance gender equality in the world of work. Strengthening women’s ability to make decisions independently requires policy changes that reflect their voices and specific needs.

Systems and institutions are crucial in promoting gender equality and creating a level playing field for both women and men in the economy. Legislative bodies, which often serve as the primary entities responsible for making and influencing laws and decisions, play a critical role in shaping the political, economic and social opportunities. To ensure that policies truly reflect the interests and amplify the voices of all groups, including women and girls, it is essential to have diverse representation within governing bodies. Women’s representation is necessary to promote effective governance and advance gender equality and women’s economic empowerment.

FIGURE 45.

Status of a national strategy for youth employment, as a distinct strategy or as part of a national employment strategy, latest year

● In the process of developing ● Developed or adopted ● Operationalized

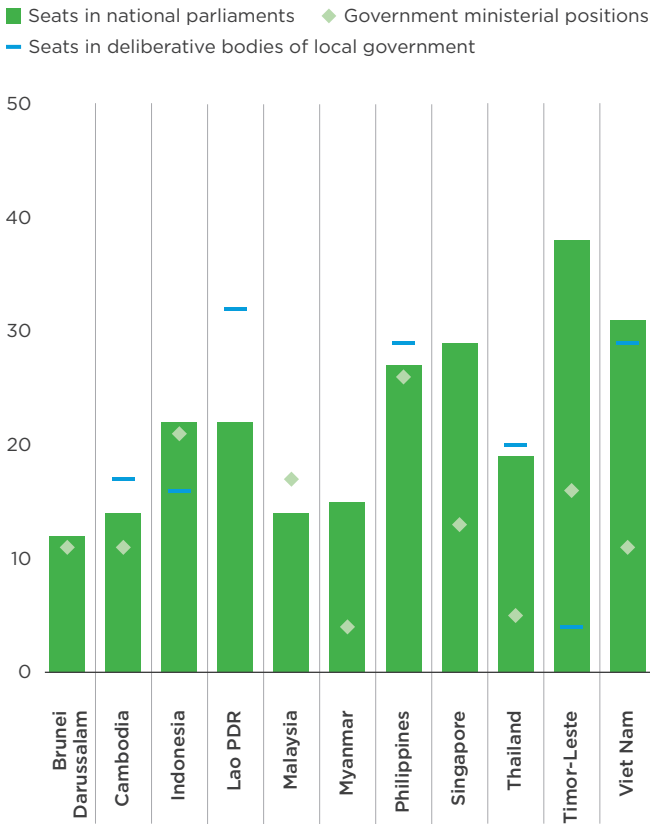


Source: SDG Global Database.

The progress towards increasing women’s representation in national parliaments has been slow, with women holding more than 25 per cent of seats in national parliaments in only four countries in South-East Asia. Although women’s political representation is higher at the local level, women still hold fewer decision-making roles than men in all deliberative bodies. The proportion of women in governmental ministerial positions varies across the region, ranging from 4 per cent in Myanmar to 26 per cent in the Philippines (figure 46). Moreover, men predominantly occupy chairs of permanent committees, and gender segregation persists in portfolio allocations. Women are more likely to chair permanent committees that focus on gender equality, while remaining significantly underrepresented in areas that are traditionally dominated by men, such as foreign affairs and finance. Among the nine countries with available data, only three (the Philippines, Singapore and Timor-Leste) have a woman chair of a permanent committee on finance or foreign affairs. Thus, women have limited influence in crucial policy domains (figure 47).

FIGURE 46.

Women’s share of seats in national parliaments, deliberative bodies of local government and government ministerial positions, latest year (percentage)

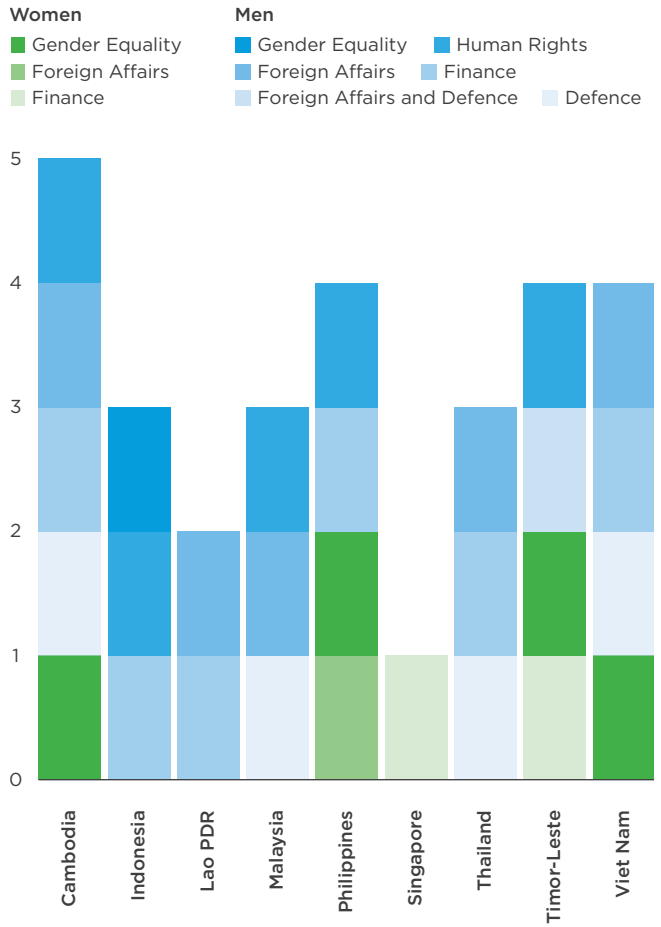


Source: SDG Global Database (seats held by women in national parliaments and deliberative bodies of local government) and UN DESA Gender Data Hub (women’s share of government ministerial positions).

Promoting women’s representation in political decision-making necessitates the establishment of robust legal frameworks that enhance women’s access to political institutions. The implementation of legislative candidate quotas and reserved seats can contribute to increasing women’s representation in government, although the actual impact may not always be immediate or as significant as anticipated.²⁹ In the ASEAN region, three countries currently have gender quotas for parliament. Countries in the region with quotas tend to have greater representation of women in parliaments. For instance, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam have the highest proportions of seats held by women in their national parliaments at 38 per cent and 31 per cent, respectively (figure 46 and figure 48). Nevertheless, quotas alone are insufficient. To amplify women’s voices, legal frameworks and policies must also address discriminatory social norms and gender dynamics in the economy and society at large.

FIGURE 47.

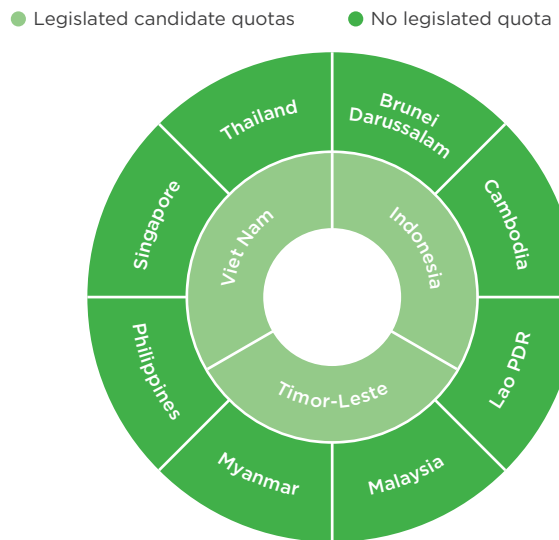
Number of people (aged 46+) chairing permanent committees (Lower Chamber or Unicameral), by sex and focus of the committee, latest year (number)



Source: SDG Global Database.

FIGURE 48.

Gender quota for parliament (reserved seats and legislated candidate quotas), latest year



Source: UN DESA Gender Data Hub.

Endnotes

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- 2 UN Women (2024). [Women's Economic Empowerment Strategy](#).
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- 9 For further details, see United Nations Population Division. [Definition of Projection Scenarios](#).
- 10 All gender data presented in this factsheet was accessed as of July 2024. All graphs presented in this factsheet visualize data as per latest available year.
- 11 The [Women's Economic Empowerment Strategy](#), published by UN Women in 2024, identifies three Accelerators of Gender Equality: women in the world of work, transforming care systems and gender-responsive climate action. The strategy lists three cross-cutting areas where UN Women is strategically placed to influence transformative change; and five pathways to change. It identifies three challenges that need to be addressed to achieve women's economic empowerment: systemic inequality, inequality of opportunity and inequality of outcomes.
- 12 For a glossary on the care economy, see: [United Nations. \(2024\). Transforming Care Systems in the Context of the Sustainable Development Goals and Our Common Agenda. UN System Policy Paper](#).
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- 27 Ibid.
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- 29 ESCAP (2019). [Pathways to Influence: Promoting the Role of Women's Transformative Leadership to Achieve the SDGs in Asia and the Pacific](#).

UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide. UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to implement these standards. It stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on five priority areas: increasing women's leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes;

enhancing women's economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.

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