

TIJ-IGLP Workshop 2019

Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Where we are at and where are we heading to in the ASEAN region

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Background and overview

1. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a regional intergovernmental organization comprising ten countries in Southeast Asia which are Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam. The region is home to approximately 65 million people half of which are women and girls. While the region has rapidly prospered and has achieved remarkable progress in poverty alleviation with extreme poverty has fallen from 17 per cent in 2005 to 7 per cent across the region in 2013, inequality both within and between countries in ASEAN has become a taxing challenge. Even though the region is one of the world's fastest expanding economies, with a combined economy of US\$2.6 trillion, inequalities have on the contrary widened across ASEAN (UNESCAP 2018).
2. In this regards, the situation is exceedingly intricate when it comes to the issue of gender equality. Given the diversities and heterogeneities of history, culture, ethnicity, religion, faith and development progress among the ten countries, gender architecture and the ensuing status of women in ASEAN are far from being uniform. While the Philippines has successfully made it to the global top ten as the most gender equal nation in Asia, based on the ranking of the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index (2018), other countries in Southeast Asia such as Myanmar, Viet Nam and Lao PDR have yet to make significant stride in addressing women's under-representation in legislator, senior official and manager roles as well as inequalities between sexes in basic literacy rates and enrolment in tertiary education.
3. In similar vein, in the area of political participation and leadership, women's representation in ASEAN ranges from 28 per cent in the Philippines to 20 percent in Cambodia and 11 percent in Thailand (UN Women 2015). Despite ongoing efforts and discussion to apply the 30 per cent quota system in ASEAN countries, the average participation of women in parliament across ASEAN sits at about 20 per cent, lagging behind the global average of 23.8 per cent.

Commitment and progress

4. In spite of some setbacks and the fact that more need to be done for gender equality and women's empowerment in Southeast Asia, significant progress has been achieved in ASEAN's efforts and commitment to gender equality. All the ten ASEAN member states (AMS) have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). There have been considerable advances in applying CEDAW in the development of gender equality laws and policies across the region. The AMS' commitment to gender equality is articulated in their national policies and legislation while non-discrimination and equality principles are embedded in the constitution of all AMS (ACWC 2018).
5. As for high-level political commitment, ASEAN's firm commitment to achieve gender equality and empowerment of women and girls is enshrined in the ASEAN Vision 2025 and embedded in key ASEAN instruments, namely the Declaration of the Advancement of Women in the ASEAN Region (1988), the Ha Noi Declaration on the Enhancement of Welfare and Development of ASEAN Women and Children (2010), the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Elimination of Violence Against Children in ASEAN (2013) as well as the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Women (2015). Concretely, the ASEAN Committee on Women (ACW) and the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children were established to serve as main sectoral bodies of ASEAN to work on gender equality and empowerment of women and girls.
6. The year 2017 marked a successful year for ASEAN in moving ahead with championing the cause of women and girls. At the 31st ASEAN Summit in Manila, the ASEAN Leaders adopted the Declaration on the Gender-Responsive Implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the Sustainable Development Goals. The Declaration secured commitment on mainstreaming gender perspectives on implementing key regional and global instruments into the work of all three community pillars of ASEAN; political and security, economic and socio-cultural. At the same time, the ASEAN Leaders also adopted the Joint Statement on Promoting Women, Peace and Security in ASEAN and the ASEAN Leaders adopted the Action Agenda on Mainstreaming Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) in ASEAN, which aims to mainstream women's economic empowerment through innovation, trade and inclusive business, and human capital development.

Challenges and ways forward

7. Changes in gender norms and behaviours: tackling gender inequalities requires deep-seated changes in discriminatory attitudes towards women and girls. It is also pivotal to transcend general misconception that gender equality and women's empowerment is solely a "woman's business". Acknowledging the importance of transforming gender norms and combatting harmful stereotypes, the 3rd ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Women (AMMW) held in 2018 calls for the engagement of boys and men as agents of change in

espousing gender equality and in instigating positive changes in gender norms and behaviours which are the pre-requisites of any structural transformation towards equality.

8. **Unpaid care work and informal sector:** while women's economic empowerment has become the key agenda in promoting gender equality in ASEAN, women's unpaid care work remains largely unaddressed. Indeed, care work adds between two and four hours to a woman's day, resulting in the so-called women's double day. On average, women in Asia do two and a half times more unpaid care work than men – this includes tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for dependents. If we were to put a value on such work in terms of time spent, globally it would equate to US\$10 trillion a year (ADB 2015). Increasingly, there has been a concerted agreement to include the issue of unpaid care work in the agenda of ASEAN's work on gender equality.
9. **Women as non-homogenous:** both policy narratives, programmes and projects by ASEAN sectoral bodies to date have regarded women as one group of population with insufficient nuances on diversities of lives, experiences and needs of different groups of women such as women with disabilities, ethnic women, rural women and women living with HIV. Moving forward, it was encouraged and agreed by all ASEAN Ministers working on women and gender issues to assure that the intersectionality and diversities of women and girls of ASEAN are taken into account in the next workplan (2021-2025) of ASEAN Committee on Women and relevant ASEAN bodies and framework.
10. **Data and evidence especially on violence against women and girls (VAWG):** an estimated 6 to 44 per cent of women and girls in ASEAN have experienced physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of their partners. VAWG affects not only women, but their children, families, communities, workplaces and the wider society. However progress has been uneven; some forms of VAWG, such as marital rape and economic violence for example were not covered in current legislation. Other areas that still require further attention include data gaps on the extent and impact of VAWG. In fact, quality data and evidence on women's experiences with violence are critical to effectively prevent and respond to VAWG. It is very much needed for evidence-based advocacy efforts, resource mobilization, budget-making, policy formulation and implementation and to monitor the impact of policies and programmes to eliminate VAWG.
11. **Cross-border issues:** Violations of women's social rights are found in transnational phenomena like trafficking, prostitution and migration. These concerns have both economic and social underpinnings as they represent women's ways of coping with poverty. However, they require the government to provide social protection and facilitate women's access to social justice. The cross-border character of migration and trafficking requires a regional mechanism for handling complaints and cases. The recent ratification of the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking of Persons, especially Women and Children, is an excellent initiative in this direction. The possibility of a similar regional instrument governance mechanism for migration should be pursued as it strengthens the protection of all migrants, among others.

12. Gender budgeting and human resources: Policy and practices for gender-responsive budgeting vary such 10.5 per cent of the national budget in Viet Nam to 5 per cent of the total government agency budget in the Philippines. Others have yet to make explicit their GAD budget policy and annual budget allocation. 5. There is a need to develop the capacity of legal enforcement officials on substantive recognition of the rights of women and children. Also, there is a need to raise duty bearers' consciousness of women's rights and overall public awareness and involvement.
