

Fostering Women's Entrepreneurship in ASEAN

TRANSFORMING PROSPECTS, TRANSFORMING SOCIETIES





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Foreword



Across Asia and the Pacific, women still cannot fully exercise their rights to decent work and full and productive employment. Women's overall labour force participation in the region is just 48 per cent. Between 1990 and 2016, the female-to-male ratio in labour force participation rates declined from 0.67 to 0.61 in Asia-Pacific. In South-East Asia, the gender gap in labour force participation is 23 percentage points.

Advancing women's economic empowerment is essential for inclusive and sustainable development. Increasing women's participation in the economy could add an additional US \$12 trillion to annual global output by 2025. Closing gender gaps in hours worked, participation and productivity could result in GDP gains of up to 48 per cent for South Asia (excluding India) and 30 per cent for East and South-East Asia (excluding China) by 2025.

Entrepreneurship enables women to both empower themselves and contribute to inclusive and sustainable development. The 61.3 million women who own and operate businesses within the ten member States of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are crucial to this agenda. The proportion of firms with female participation in ownership in ASEAN is relatively high, standing at 69 per cent in the Philippines, 64 per cent in Thailand and 51 per cent in Viet Nam. Yet these women entrepreneurs are often in sectors which trap them in informal employment and lower value-added activities. Women entrepreneurs in ASEAN have limited access to education and training, financial resources, technology and social capital compared to their male counterparts. This is compounded by persisting discriminatory social and cultural norms.

These constraints on women's entrepreneurship are costly, not just for women but for society. Gender gaps in entrepreneurship and labour force participation can cause a severe negative impact on aggregate productivity and income per capita. In ASEAN countries, these income losses range from 7 per cent in Cambodia to 29 per cent in Brunei Darussalam.

The challenges and opportunities the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) will bring to women entrepreneurs is the focus of this report. The measures in the AEC Blueprint 2025 are expected to affect the growth prospects of small and medium-sized enterprises. They should improve market access and physical and ICT infrastructure and increase competition.

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ASEAN integration should enable entrepreneurs to expand their customer bases. Yet increased competition will be challenging for many small and medium-sized enterprises. Women entrepreneurs in small and micro enterprises are found to be particularly exposed. Indeed, the sectors projected to expand are associated with the informal economy and vulnerable working conditions for women entrepreneurs — including retail, services, agriculture and trade.

Within ASEAN, ensuring women entrepreneurs enjoy equal opportunities and reap the benefits of regional economic integration is integral to building a prosperous, inclusive and resilient Economic Community. This report proposes actions to be taken by ASEAN Governments and key stakeholders to create an enabling legal and policy environment for women's entrepreneurship. Two key levers for change are highlighted: greater access to innovative technologies; and creative approaches to making finance and credit available to women entrepreneurs. These would support the development of other key areas in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, such as education and training, access to business support and networks and opening market opportunities.

I trust that this publication will help to stimulate action to foster gender-responsive ecosystems to promote women's entrepreneurship and contribute to accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in ASEAN countries and beyond.



Shamshad Akhtar

Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of ESCAP

Message from the ASEAN Secretariat



Women's economic empowerment is crucial in achieving inclusive and sustainable development. In Southeast Asia, women have contributed tremendously to the region's economic growth. However, challenges remain in ensuring that women get a fair and equal chance to participate in the economy. The establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) has brought about a myriad of opportunities for the peoples of ASEAN. These opportunities are, nonetheless, not a given if women are not enabled and empowered to tap into the prospects of regional economic integration.

Against this backdrop, this publication on *Fostering Women's Entrepreneurship in ASEAN: Transforming Prospects, Transforming Societies* by UN ESCAP is timely both in terms of the issues it addresses and the solutions put forward. The publication offers robust analysis on women entrepreneurs and their invaluable potential to drive the region's economy and society at large.

Indeed, the building of a gender-responsive ecosystem for women's entrepreneurship requires multi-sector engagement. The cross-sectoral approach on women's entrepreneurship is reflected in the work of ASEAN through the ASEAN Committee on Women (ACW), the ASEAN Coordinating Committee on MSME (ACCMSME) and the ASEAN Women Entrepreneurs' Network (AWEN) among others. In this regard, the ASEAN Women's Business Conference held on 31 August 2017 in Manila, the Philippines, as a commemorative activity of ASEAN's 50th Anniversary has provided us with a multi-sector platform for strategic dialogue on women's economic empowerment.

Fostering women's entrepreneurship will empower not only women but all of us. Its transformative power will help us achieve the ASEAN Community that is politically cohesive, economically integrated and socially responsible. This step towards the realization of the ASEAN Vision 2025 complements the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development whereby women's economic empowerment is embedded in every goal and target.

We trust that this publication will be of meaningful use to policymakers and practitioners at regional and national levels in the design and implementation of evidence-based policies and practices on women's entrepreneurship in ASEAN.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Vongthep Arthakaivattavee".

Vongthep Arthakaivattavee

Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN
for ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community

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Table of Contents

Foreword	3
Message from the ASEAN Secretariat	5
Acknowledgements	6
Figures	8
Tables	8
Boxes	9
Acronyms and abbreviations	9
Introduction	11
Chapter 1: Women entrepreneurs and the AEC	12
Chapter 2: A profile of women entrepreneurs	23
Chapter 3: ICT opens new horizons	36
Chapter 4: Banking on women	45
Chapter 5: Shaping the policy landscape	54
Chapter 6: Growth, inclusion and equality	63
Conclusion	69
Bibliography	70

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