

# Executive summary

In the quarter century since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA), Southeast Asian governments have accelerated their commitments to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. All Southeast Asian countries have ratified the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, which aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework in 2020. Yet, the region still has a long path toward gender equality. The *Social Institutions and Gender Index 2021 Regional Report for Southeast Asia* demonstrates that discrimination in laws, social norms and practices in Southeast Asia remains high compared with the rest of the world. The economic cost of discriminatory social institutions for Southeast Asia amounts to around USD 200 billion, accounting for 7.5% of the regional gross domestic product (GDP) and translates into a loss of USD 1 853 per capita. While wide variation exists across Southeast Asian countries, the region displays high levels of discrimination in terms of intra-household dynamics and caregiving roles, labour status, political representation as well as pervasive domestic violence. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates women's vulnerabilities and reinforces pre-existing imbalances. In this context, this report explores how discriminatory social institutions hinder women's empowerment and gender equality. It also calls for governments to take urgent action to build truly inclusive societies.

## Discriminatory social institutions constitute major barriers to women's empowerment and their investment in human capital

### ***Laws and social norms limit women's access to sexual and reproductive healthcare and enable harmful practices that result in poor health and well-being outcomes***

The SDG 3 prioritises women's health and well-being, particularly through its emphasis on access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services and the reduction of maternal mortality. No country in Southeast Asia legally guarantees universal access to contraception. In 2018, 13% of women of reproductive age (15-49 years) reported having an unmet need for family planning, which was a slight increase compared with 2014 (12%). Meanwhile, important legal limitations and social norms constrain women's reproductive autonomy, negatively affect their sexual and reproductive health and lead to poor health outcomes. In 2017, one-half of Southeast Asian countries had maternal mortality rates higher than 100 deaths per 100 000 live births. One contributing factor to maternal mortality in the region is the prevalence of adolescent pregnancies. These early pregnancies increase the likelihood of maternal mortality, while also negatively affecting girls' educational attainment and quality of life. In 2017, Southeast Asia had high rates of adolescent births, with an average rate of 43 births per 1 000 women aged 15 to 19 years. Adolescent pregnancy rates are closely correlated with the prevalence rate of girl child marriage, revealing the fundamental role of social norms in women's suboptimal health outcomes.

About 25% of women in Southeast Asia have suffered physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner at least once in their lifetime. Violence, and the fear of it, can prevent women from pursuing

education, working, earning an income, making decisions about their health or their children's education, and exercising their political rights and voice. The prevalence of gender-based violence in Southeast Asia is deeply rooted in discriminatory social norms and attitudes that consider violence a private matter. On average, 30% of Southeast Asian women and girls believe that a husband can be justified in hitting or beating his wife under certain circumstances, such as if she burns food, argues with him, goes out without telling him, neglects the children, or refuses sex with him. Likewise, female genital mutilation, a particular form of violence against young girls and adolescents, continues to exist in several countries in the region as a result of customary, religious or traditional practices or laws that allow and encourage this harmful practice as well as the absence of legislative frameworks aimed at eliminating and banning female genital mutilation.

### ***While parity in education supports women's empowerment, deeply embedded social norms lead to gender segregation in education***

Southeast Asia has achieved gender parity in education. In all Southeast Asian countries for which data are available, as many girls as boys – and sometimes more girls than boys – are enrolled in primary, secondary and tertiary education. Nevertheless, deeply entrenched social norms trigger gender segregation in tertiary education, notably in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, which has a direct impact on women's and men's choice of labour sector and status. The lack of representation of women in STEM fields leads to their underrepresentation in positions such as engineers, scientists or architects, which are often high-status and high-paying careers. This has further consequences not only on women's self-esteem and representation in positions of power but also on their level of income and their economic empowerment in general. Social norms, stereotypes and strong unconscious gender biases perceive STEM fields as masculine domains, which guides women's and men's decisions to enrol in these types of programmes. Indeed, these stereotypes and biases begin to be internalised as early as in primary or secondary education, during which learning materials and gender-biased teaching perpetuate gender stereotypes by assigning certain functions and skills to girls and boys. Furthermore, the lack of female teachers in STEM fields as the level of education increases combined with the low labour force participation of women in STEM-oriented economic sectors has a cyclical effect resulting in fewer female role models in STEM, which in turn, plays a crucial role in shaping young girls' expectations and further reduces their engagement in these fields.

### ***Women's economic and political empowerment is hindered by discriminatory laws and social norms***

Economic inclusion empowers women to make meaningful and strategic decisions on their own and to realise their potential through investment in health and education. Yet, women's labour force participation in the region falls far behind that of men. On average, the labour force participation rate is 23 percentage points lower for women than for men in Southeast Asia. One of leading causes of this difference are discriminatory social norms that confine women to reproductive and care roles. For instance, more than one in five people in Southeast Asia have negative views on women's paid employment outside of the home. Moreover, 45% believe that children will suffer when their mothers work. The burden of unpaid care and domestic work hinders women's full and active access to labour markets. In 2018, women spent, on average, four times more time than men did on unpaid care and domestic work. COVID-19 has also exacerbated the workload of childcare, household chores and elderly care which has been primarily faced by women and girls in Southeast Asia.

Laws and social norms hinder women's access to productive assets such as land and financial services, which are important factors for their economic empowerment. Especially in rural areas where agricultural activities dominate the economy, land ownership and access to assets are critical for women's ability to secure their rights and take control over their lives. Women represent only 13% of landowners on average

while they account for 39% of the agricultural workers across the region. Legal frameworks and land titling practices perpetuate these imbalances by discriminating against women's ownership and administration of productive assets as well as by granting decision-making power to men. These laws and practices are rooted in the powerful social expectation that a central part of men's identity is being the primary decision makers in important family matters, especially when it comes to investments and large family assets such as property.

Women's political representation and inclusion in decision-making bodies is limited in the region despite the progress made since the early 2000s. In 2020, women accounted for just 20% of parliamentarians in the region. Discriminatory social norms are one of the persistent causes of women's underrepresentation and deny them opportunities to exercise their voices and make decisions on an equal footing with men. Indeed, more than half of the population in Southeast Asia believe that men make better political leaders than women, thus societies fail to prioritise women's political participation, leadership and representation. Women's underrepresentation yields a self-sustaining cycle. When women lack representation, their perspectives are less likely to be taken into account, which, in turn, makes it less likely that actions will be taken to eliminate the barriers to women's greater participation.

## A path towards gender equality: Key policy recommendations

COVID-19 has disproportionately affected women and girls and there is a risk of potential regressions in terms of gender equality. COVID-19 recovery policies should include a gender perspective not only to mitigate the negative consequences on women and girls but also to put the root causes of gender inequality at the heart of holistic policy making for truly inclusive and gender-equal societies. Southeast Asian countries need to take action to tackle discriminatory laws, social norms and practices to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment.

### Key policy actions to fast forward gender equality in Southeast Asia

#### Update and harmonise legislation

- Ensure that the national legal frameworks of Southeast Asian countries are in alignment with international conventions and amend laws to eliminate discriminatory legislation

#### Develop enforcement mechanisms

- Strengthen the capacity building of law enforcement authorities and guarantee legal redress
- Sensitise all actors in the judicial system to gender-based discrimination
- Develop adequate infrastructure and service provision in remote areas to ensure that all women have access to justice and benefit from public programmes

#### Adopt a holistic and intersectional approach

- Address gender-based discrimination at all social and political levels
- Integrate an intersectional approach in public policy, which incorporates women's other identities, such as ethnicity, age and religion, to reduce gender inequalities.
- Engage men and boys as positive agents of change

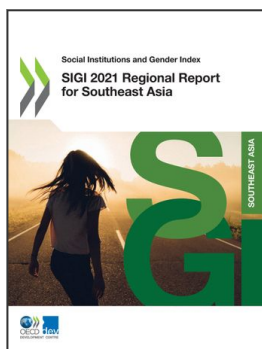
**Invest in data**

- Strengthen the scope and the quality of sex-disaggregated data collection at all geographical levels
- Strengthen statistical co-operation across Southeast Asian countries to guarantee the comparability and support the monitoring of SDG 5
- Invest in data collection on gender norms, including on the norms of masculinities

**Improve communication and awareness**

- Conduct effective communications campaigns aimed at eliminating the various forms of gender-based discrimination





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