Women’s Economic Empowerment in Southeast Asia

The Center for Women’s Economic Empowerment (CWEE) at CIPE advances gender equality in emerging markets to build more inclusive, thriving economies and democracies that deliver for all citizens. This briefer outlines CIPE approaches to promoting women’s economic empowerment (WEE) in Southeast Asia. This briefer provides some examples of CIPE programming and areas of interest for future research, project design, and policy exploration.

The Status of Women in Southeast Asia

Women across Southeast Asia face acute barriers that block full political and economic participation in society. Factors such as unequal caregiving, lack of labor protections, inadequate political representation, and gender-based violence undermine gender equality in the region. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Gender Inequality Index places the majority of the 10 Associations of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the mid-to-low end of its rankings, which are evaluated based on differences in reproductive health, empowerment, and economic status between men and women. Furthermore, the 2022 Global Gender Gap Report shows that East Asia and the Pacific remains near the bottom of the regional divisions regarding its progress towards closing the gender gap between men and women on the dimensions of Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment. At the current rate of progress, researchers project that it will take East Asia and the Pacific 168 years to close its gender gap (versus 60 years in Western Europe, for instance).

At the same time, some forms of progress have been made toward gender equality. The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) 2021 Regional Report for Southeast Asia highlights some of this progress. The report cites the fact that all ten ASEAN countries have ratified the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The report also acknowledges that the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework (2021-2025) have more recently affirmed the region’s commitment to gender parity. Yet the continued existence of discriminatory social institutions, embedded social norms, and unequal laws demonstrates that more must be done to elevate women as full participants in political and economic life in Southeast Asia.

Pervasive inequalities have a profound impact on women’s economic opportunities and outcomes. The SIGI 2021 report found that women in Southeast Asia are far more likely than men to participate in the informal economy or to contribute unpaid labor through domestic work. The nature of this informal and unpaid work precludes formal labor protections and job security. Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these existing inequalities. Overall, the economic cost of gender inequality in the region is estimated at a stark $200 billion.

These structural inequities impact women in business. An article from East Asia Forum entitled “Unique Barriers Face Women-Owned Businesses” reports that in comparison to self-employed women, self-employed men in Southeast Asia are 2.24 times more likely to be employers. As a result, men are often better positioned to expand their businesses and take home larger paychecks. The article also mentions that women in the region are less likely than men to establish businesses in the first place due to factors such as human and social capital limitations, lack of access to finance, and other institutional barriers.
CIPE’s Role in Advancing Southeast Asian Women’s Economic Empowerment

To help address these gaps, CIPE oversees diverse and far-ranging programming in Southeast Asia. CIPE promotes the establishment of informal and formal networks that build capacity and promote the leadership of businesswomen in the country in order to drive changes that lead to economic empowerment. CIPE works with women’s chambers of commerce and business associations to provide trainings, skills development, and mentorship opportunities.

In addition, CIPE works with local partners to provide technical assistance and small grants for projects that promote women’s economic empowerment. These opportunities allow women to exchange information and best practices; establish mentorship links between organizations; develop new business and export opportunities; and build relationships among women business owners and leaders.

Philippines: Networking and Resources for Women Entrepreneurs

In the Philippines, CIPE has partnered with the University of Philippines’ Center for Women’s and Gender Studies’ Angat Bayi Program. This Program aims to develop and support elected women leaders – Angat Bayi Fellows – at the municipal level to carry out and advance a rights-based, gender-responsive, participatory, inclusive, and sustainable development agenda. Through this partnership, CIPE and Angat Bayi aim to strengthen the capacity of women entrepreneurs affected by the pandemic by leveraging the leadership of Angat Bayi Fellows to advance women’s entrepreneurship and bolster women’s political and economic empowerment. In partnership with Angat Bayi Fellows in 2021, CIPE conducted a pilot program that involved conducting women’s entrepreneurship training and supporting 24 women-owned enterprises across four local government units: the Municipality of Isabela; Negros Occidental, Santiago City; Isabela, Province of Capiz; and Municipality of Sta. Barbara, Iloilo. CIPE and Angat Bayi also developed Bayi Tiangge – a collaborative and entrepreneurial resource hub and online platform by and for women entrepreneurs. This platform helps women entrepreneurs find innovative ways to rebuild and grow their enterprises. Bayi Tiangge provides a space for online marketing and selling, and functions as a repository of information useful to women entrepreneurs. This resource lists suppliers, collaborators for partnerships, and government support services for women-owned micro and small enterprises.

Cambodia: Policy Advocacy for Gender-Inclusive Economic Reform

Women entrepreneurs fall within a demographic group that presents an opportunity to grow democratic influence in the Cambodian state. Women play an important role in Cambodia’s small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) environment, as 65 percent of the country’s SMEs are women-owned. The barriers to women’s active participation in the Cambodian economy mirrors many barriers faced by women entrepreneurs throughout the world.

CIPE’s partner, Cambodian Women’s Entrepreneurship Association (CWEA), is a growing and powerful voice in Cambodia. CWEA successfully advocates for expanding opportunities for women in business and creating a better enabling environment. CWEA encourages and supports the growth of women-owned businesses by providing e-commerce technical assistance, bottom-up policy advocacy, and networking services to its members. CWEA represents and advocates for women entrepreneurs in an increasingly restrictive environment. As a result of CIPE’s capacity-building efforts, CWEA has experienced tremendous growth and has engaged with many policymakers through public-private dialogues. CWEA is now considered the leading voice of women entrepreneurs in Cambodia.

2. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/236f41d0-en/index.htm?itemId=/content/publication/236f41d0-en
4. For Cambodia’s Women Entrepreneurs, Barriers to Expansion May Be Starting to Crumble (voacambodia.com)

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