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Gender equality in the Mekong region: Role of leadership

Dr Andrea Haefner and Dr Dhara Shah



POLICY BRIEF

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ABOUT THE POLICY BRIEF

Between 2021 to 2023, the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) funded training programs on gender and inclusive leadership, conducted by the Griffith Asia Institute in partnership with the Laos Australia Institute and the Laos Gender Development Association. The programs aimed to support women and men of diverse backgrounds from the government, private sector, and not-for-profit organisations to develop inclusive leadership capabilities which generate a competitive advantage for Mekong countries in the newly established Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Independent of these funded training programs, Griffith University scholars conducted research with some participants who volunteered to inform this research and policy brief.

Cover image: The Mekong River is one of the world's great rivers, flowing through six countries: China, Myanmar, Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam. (Vince Gx | Unsplash)

Introduction

Since the ratification of ASEAN's Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) on 15 November 2020, coming into force in 2022, supporting gender equality and women's empowerment has become one of the important preconditions to ensure inclusive growth in the region. Recently a new ASEAN policy brief was released with the focus on advancing gender and business as part of inclusive COVID-19 economic recovery.¹ While overall there has been progress in the region, women have inequitably had a negative impact. Thus, it has become imperative for small and less regionally integrated countries such as Lao PDR that can benefit from an extended regional economic framework and from including the whole population in the workforce. Gender equality is critical for economic growth and long-term development, while also being able to drive social mobility across the population on all levels, including change in families, communities, and the national level. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) trade pact can provide both positive outcomes for women in Lao PDR and the Mekong region. Thus, understanding the challenges for women's economic participation and empowerment along with the systemic barriers in these countries has become critical to determine opportunities for the future and supporting women's leadership that will drive positive change and economic growth.

Context

Women's participation in education and leadership is progressing worldwide; however, women are still underrepresented in leadership positions across ASEAN countries, with only 2% increase in women managers in Southeast Asia over two decades.² In recent times, women in leadership and senior management positions have become a topic of discussion for leaders all around the globe, as COVID-19 has had a disproportionate negative impact on women due to disparity in position of power at work and home. A recent report by McKenzie³ pointed to the positive impact of gender diversity in the workplace with companies having gender balance earned over 25% more profits than the ones with lack of gender balance. Thus, it makes business, economic, and societal sense to have more women in leadership positions.

The Lao government created the Lao Women's Union (LWU) to play a major role in the policymaking of women's development and equality between women and men, including campaigns to promote gender equality through gender mainstreaming in the work of the National Assembly.⁴ As of February 2021, there were 27.5 percent female members of parliament, compared to 72.5 percent male members.⁵ This figure is above the current global average for female representation in the national legislature of around 24%, with the second most female representatives in ASEAN. This is also the case in the

Politburo of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPPR), having around 15% of women since the 11th Party Congress in 2021.⁶

However, across all levels of the Lao government, only 5% of government decision-making positions are held by women. Similarly, only ten, or less than 8%, of the 143 district governors of the Lao PDR are women. Women also make up only 228, or 2.64 percent, of the country's 8,608 village leaders.⁷ Yet while there has been some progress there still remains platforms and opportunities for women to participate and be involved in higher level positions across the economic spectrum.

Women are still underrepresented within the workforce within the ASEAN countries and are more focused on unpaid care, domestic work, social norms, and wage disparity.⁸ While gender wage gaps exist across countries worldwide, in ASEAN countries the earnings for women remains below that of men.⁹ In 2017, employed women earned \$9 for every \$10 men earned and there are unequal pay levels for equal types of work as well as job segregation and glass ceilings. One way to close the pay gaps is to promote career paths for women into leadership and decision-making and opening doors to a new generation of women leaders in ASEAN countries.

Overall, there are difficulties in the effective participation of women at all levels of decision making in areas of political, economic, and public life within the Mekong region. Apart from the governments themselves, donors like Australia have been actively working to promote gender equality and women's leadership in these countries. Understanding the Mekong countries context is important when considering recommendations and way forwards.

Leadership for gender inclusion in ASEAN

ASEAN has been at the forefront of economic integration in Asia, the world's fastest-growing region and was also central in negotiating RCEP, where the objective was to achieve a modern, comprehensive, high-quality, and mutually beneficial economic partnership agreement among ASEAN member states and free trade agreement (FTA) partners. Recently in October 2022 at the ASEAN Women leaders' Summit, an ASEAN policy action brief was issued with the focus on advancing gender and business reporting to implement women's economic principles as part of the pandemic economic recovery within ASEAN countries. Gender mainstreaming strategy has been a topic of discussion since the early 2000 with policymakers and leaders requiring new skills and perspectives.¹⁰ Over two decades later, these discussions have become more prominent with many organisations, introducing special programs and training for women and staff. ASEAN has shown a strong commitment to gender inclusion by establishing many special units working on gender issues and gender equality has become an accepted norm. Yet,

there has been slow progress and not all countries have experienced positive results, particularly when looking at senior management positions.

By 2025, advancing women's equality in the Asia Pacific countries might add \$4.5 trillion to the region's total yearly GDP.¹¹ Over the last few decades, Southeast Asian countries' rapid and uneven economic expansion has created new and difficult imbalances between socioeconomic groups, as well as between men and women, all of which has been further exacerbated by COVID.

In most of these countries, particularly Lao PDR and other Mekong countries women have traditionally been engaged in agricultural and household work in rural regions. Women have engaged in crop production, animal production, horticulture, post-harvesting activities, agro-social forestry, and fishing, and it is vital to consider their numerous roles as mothers, wives, farmers, entrepreneurs, and agents.¹² Women's tasks are frequently focused on household maintenance, with major domestic and reproductive responsibilities. Women play an important role in agriculture, yet it is often overlooked. Similarly, women's role in formal MSME ownership is important including, accommodation, and food; transport and storage; and manufacturing.

Overall while there has been a shift with regards to gender inclusion within ASEAN countries, particularly the Mekong countries, more work needs to be done to ensure women have a voice within leadership and policies that affect them and their growth.

Ways forward:

- Recognising the implications of RCEP for gender inclusion in different sectors.
- Ensuring that ASEAN policies contribute to reducing socioeconomic classes through gender equality policies instead of further enhancing inequalities.
- Engaging men and making them accountable champions on gender equality.

Barriers limiting women's opportunity for economic empowerment

ASEAN has been at the forefront of economic integration in one of the world's fastest-growing regions. However, over the last few decades, Southeast Asian countries' rapid and uneven economic expansion has created new and difficult imbalances between socioeconomic classes, as well as between men and women, even further

exacerbated by COVID-19. The labour force participation rate for women has generally been lower in Asia with women on average being 70% less likely than men to be in the workforce and some countries in Central and East Asia have experienced a small decline.¹³ A variety of systemic barriers exist in Laos and the broader Mekong region that prohibit women from ascending to positions of leadership, including income disparity between men and women; lack of female decision makers and role models; sexual harassment at the workplace; and violence against women; and unequal access to and control of resources. Sexual harassment in the workplace is now recognized as a workplace hazard, a human rights violation that jeopardizes women's equality of opportunity and treatment in Asia and the Pacific.¹⁴

Research suggests that increasing the presence of women in the workforce can have significant benefits for economic growth and welfare. An analysis conducted by McKinsey in 2019 found that companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 25 percent more likely to have above-average profitability.¹⁵ Yet neither economic growth nor increasing education appears sufficient to pull women into the labour force. Within the Mekong region, women have played a significant role in the agriculture, fisheries, and farming, yet they are often under-represented or excluded in the decision making around the area. Oxfam's study found that when women are more involved in decisions regarding the use of resources and development it is more likely to be stronger, equally shared, and sustainable.¹⁶

In Lao PDR for example, rural areas are undergoing fast change. Increased agricultural output and off-farm job options are helping to lift certain families and communities out of poverty. However, commercialisation of agriculture can also raise vulnerability for women in asset-poor households and communities, such as those who have lost access to arable land and lack non-farm skills. A substantial portion of women's labour is underestimated and sometimes goes unnoticed. Women make up 65 percent of unpaid family workers in Lao PDR, and they spend four times as much time on housework each day as males.¹⁷

A second challenge is women's percentage in all levels of government as well as in the administration are low, leading to men being the main drivers of politics and policy in the country. Men's traditional status in terms of gender leadership is that glass ceiling issues have an impact on women's professional advancement.¹⁸ Glass ceiling restrictions, combined with gender stereotypes and prejudices, create discriminatory factors that hinder women from stepping up. Further, the lack of a critical mass of senior or outwardly successful female role models and mentors is another barrier to women in leadership. Having mentors and role models can actively guide and encourage another person's learning and growth.¹⁹

Women's economic opportunities are limited due to male-centred gender norms and unequal access to and control of resources and productive inputs. Women

entrepreneurs, both established and aspiring, have hurdles in obtaining funding in the Asia-Pacific region.²⁰ Although the credit gap exists for both men and women in many circumstances, numerous layers of gender-based restrictions frequently combine to disproportionately limit women's access to credit from formal financial institutions. The formal funding gap for women entrepreneurs in East Asia and the Pacific is 58 percent, while the gap for men is only 42 percent.²¹

These are some of the key barriers—often interlinked and cumulative—that women must overcome to climb up the leadership ladder and become successful leaders. While some governments in the region have recognised these barriers and put in place some policies but a more comprehensive and inclusive approach is needed in the coming years. To have a real economic empowerment of women within the Mekong countries, policies need to first focus on finding the specific reasons behind the gap in participation, and then address the key concerns to attract more female talent. Further having family friendly and flexible workplace policies will allow for equitable access for everyone. More particularly, in some Asian countries where safety of women is a concern, more safety and security measures need to be implemented. Lastly education, training, and development are key to encouraging more women within the workplace.

Ways forward:

- Greater commitment from all stakeholders to ensure accomplishment of gender equality goals in gender mainstreaming policies.
- Recognising the impacts of traditional norms, stereotypes and barriers on girls and women.
- Emphasising the power of role models and female leaders across all levels of government and sectors.

Opportunities to drive leadership change

Women in the Asia-Pacific region continue to be unable to fully exercise their rights to decent work, and full and productive employment. Women's economic empowerment is a road to inclusive and sustainable development in this regard. By 2025, increasing women's economic involvement might bring an additional \$12 trillion to global production.²² Gender participation in RECP may cause this proportion to be much higher than expected. Globally, women's entrepreneurship is increasingly a driver of economic growth and job creation. Asia and the Pacific stand to gain 7 percent in per capita income within roughly two generations by eliminating gender disparities in employment, including in the area of entrepreneurship.²³

In the Central Mekong Delta in Vietnam a project by IOM, aimed on promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment reported positive improvements as a result of creating income-generation prospects for women, as well as raising awareness of HIV/AIDS and human trafficking risks.²⁴ IOM reports 319 out of 322 female participants who were trained in business development, established business plans to improve income-generation activities. Of these, 275 designated further technical training in aquaculture, animal husbandry, business management, cultivation, and handicrafts (e.g., rattan-weaving). This strategic recipe of business development and technical training interpreted into enhanced access to credit and higher profits, with average revenue increased by VND 382,600 (US\$ 18) and some participants reported 350 per cent increases in income.²⁵

Gender inclusion is critical for gender-responsive enterprise creation and promotion, as well as long-term development. Because RCEP incorporates women's specific objectives and needs into appropriate ASEAN and national legislation, policies, and programs, it is fostering gender-responsive enterprise development and promotion.²⁶ This can result in increasing women's access to and use of innovative technologies in accordance with the e-ASEAN Framework and SDG 17, which calls for more cooperation and access to science, technology and innovation.²⁷

Leadership requires preparation, programmatic networking, and ongoing education and mentorship, embedded in systematic pathways that equip women for professional and organisational leadership roles.²⁸ According to the Mekong River Commission, between 1995 and 2008 the Mekong Delta has had an uncurving population growth; positive cereal production tendency; affluent aquaculture production trend; rectilinear trend in marine fishery; curved trend in rice production; poverty reduction leaning; negative GDP distribution trend across countries of region, and; positive trend in GDP per capita of Mekong Delta based on fixed price 1994.²⁹ With a growing economy that predominantly depends on agriculture and fishery, salinity, acidification, water availability, erosion, reduction of soil fertility, flood and drought are major issues associated with changes of economy flows. Government and private sector foster hydropower and renewable energy projects as one of the main pillars of the Mekong economies. Irrespective of the sector being backed by government or private investors, studies indicated that local women and men are keen on jobs on the plantation and were facing issues such as time management in terms of arriving, working for, and leaving at a certain time in transition of acquiring full time employment.³⁰

The role of men in gender norms and societal change is also a key aspect. Untangling power relations between men and women, which can influence the adoption of new positive norms, thereby facilitating and developing a new understanding of normative social behaviour. While inequitable gender norms reflect and perpetuate inequitable power relations, such norms are more often

disadvantageous to women.³¹ Changes in institutional policies thus are critical in changing gender norms that can address discriminatory power relations and reduce social and cultural norms that are one of the key systematic barriers for example in Lao PDR and lack of opportunities for all highlighting the importance of men as allies to achieve systematic change in all areas of life independent if at the family, community, or national level.³² Men's status in terms of gender leadership is that glass ceiling issues have an impact on women's professional advancement.³³ Glass ceiling restrictions, combined with gender stereotypes and prejudices, create discriminatory factors that hinder women from receiving equal pay as men, resulting in a wage disparity.³⁴ Thus the role of men in change is critical.

Ways forward:

- Promoting women entrepreneurship as a means for women to empower themselves while also contributing to prosperous, inclusive, and sustainable development.
- Gender inclusive trends facilitate making actionable organisational policies and procedures that avoid marginalising women.
- Recognising the role of men as agents of change and for providing voices to diverse range of women from urban and rural areas is critical to achieve change in the Mekong region.
- Persistent representation of gender inclusivity in leadership is a recommended prosody to highlight potential inconsistencies to decision-makers for taking proactive actions.

Conclusion

Although women's participation in education and leadership is increasing worldwide, there is still a limited number of women in the Asia-Pacific region that occupy higher posts in their career pathways. There is discrimination regarding the effective participation of women at all levels of decision making in areas of political, economic, and public life. Apart from Lao and other Mekong countries government's, donors like Australia have been actively working to promote gender equality and women's leadership in the Mekong region. However, like in other countries, there are still significant gaps in gender equality and systemic barriers for women in obtaining leadership roles, including existing social and cultural norms, lack of working opportunities, and existing policy frameworks.

Key opportunities include emphasising the power of role models and female leaders across all levels of government and sectors, advancing opportunities for women's entrepreneurship, and using the role of men as agents for change. These changes could add to improving women's

economic outcomes and underpins a more inclusive recovery strategy in Laos and the region. The cornerstone of long-term development is inclusive growth. Recognizing the implications of RCEP for the Mekong region and especially women across the various key sectors, including agriculture is crucial. Successful women's participation in RECP is critical to their success and economic growth of the region and reducing instead of increasing inequalities.

To address the gaps future research should look at the following research questions:

1. What factors influence attitudes toward women in leadership roles in Mekong region?
2. How much support is provided post COVID to emerging women to secure a leadership position in Mekong region?
3. What factors influence women wanting to commit to a leadership role in Mekong region?
4. How are developed countries similar to and different from Mekong region in terms of gender inclusive organisations?
5. What are the prerequisites of creating enticement for men to become GIL ambassadors in Mekong region?

Increasing research, particularly led by regional scholars will further provide opportunities for bridging the gap on gender equality and contributing to inclusive leadership.

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ABOUT THE GRIFFITH ASIA INSTITUTE

The Griffith Asia Institute (GAI) is an internationally recognised research centre in the Griffith Business School. GAI reflects Griffith University's longstanding commitment and future aspirations for the study of and engagement with nations of Asia and the Pacific.

At GAI, our vision is to lead new ideas, knowledge and networks that contribute to an inclusive, sustainable and prosperous Asia-Pacific region.

We do this by: i) delivering research excellence on the politics, security, trade and business, governance and economic development of the region; ii) partnering for policy and impact outcomes in the region; and iii) shaping the next generation of Asia-Pacific leaders through learning experiences.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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