



## Policy Brief

# Women and the ASEAN 2025: Locating the Gender and Human Rights Dimension of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)

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**SHAPE-SEA Secretariat**  
Rm. 308, Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies (IHRP),  
Panyaphiphat Bldg., Mahidol University, Salaya, Phuttamonthon,  
Nakhon Pathom, Thailand 73170  
[shape.seasec@gmail.com](mailto:shape.seasec@gmail.com)

## 1. Statement of the Issue

While the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 envisions a deepening regional integration, that is an inclusive, people-oriented and people-centered community integrated with the global economy through the ASEAN Economic Community, ironically the AEC Community Blueprint 2025 has no human rights and gender perspective, without which would make the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 a mere development jargon as stories of marginalized women illustrate.

- The AEC Blueprint is **predominantly economic and pro-business** with no clear regard on the rights of the communities and marginalized sector, especially marginalized women who make up almost half of the ASEAN people but whose voice is left out in the ASEAN regional integration discourse.
- As a whole the Blueprint reflects an **androcentric bias leaning on formal equality** by providing access only to ‘skilled workers and professionals,’ effectively excluding marginalized women, who usually occupy precarious work in the ASEAN.
- There is **no mention on the issue of sexual violence** – missing out the “complex relationship between economic development, economic empowerment and violence against women and girls” (Taylor et al., 2015), where economic development can potentially lead to women’s economic empowerment, while also a site of violence.
- **Significant gender gaps are found in the AEC and its three targets:** trade, agriculture, and MSMEs plans, resulting to a paradox of economic growth and persistence of poverty and inequality in the region, that put women in more vulnerable situations both in the private and public spaces.
  - While economic growth may have provided more opportunities for women’s economic empowerment, gender hierarchy remains, doubling women’s burden.
  - Most business and industries capitalize on women’s productive work they consider as cheaper labor than their male counterparts.
  - Women’s reproductive work remains undervalued, without which won’t make productive work possible.
  - While the ASEAN’s efforts to increase economic growth have provided opportunities for women in areas of education, employment, and equality before the law, “the gaps between women and men on economic participation and political empowerment remain wide” (WEF, 2017).

In short, the AEC Blueprint's lack of gender and human rights dimension in effect excludes and discriminates women, especially marginalized groups of women from actively participating in and benefitting from the ASEAN regional integration, negating the ASEAN Community Vision 2025.

## **2. Policy Options**

- Reframing the AEC Blueprint towards a rights-based, gender-responsive, transparent and accountable regional integration using the CEDAW transformative equality framework because without substantive equality there can be no inclusivity.
  - Advantage: CEDAW espouses the framework of transformative equality mandating States to provide an enabling environment where women can enjoy equally with men the access, opportunity, and beneficial results of the AEC targets, hence making women count in the ASEAN discourse, development, and benefits.
  - Disadvantage: CEDAW's framework of transformative equality transcends structural barriers to equality which can be antagonistic to the business sector on which the AEC depends the ASEAN's economic growth.
- Conduct further comprehensive study and systematic repository of data on gender in the select targets, including incidence of sexual violence in workplace/services and put in place strong regulatory and accountability mechanisms to monitor and investigate violations to women especially marginalized women, and implement adequate and effective remedies to address violations of women's and workers' rights.
  - Advantage: This will provide a strong evidence for more effective policy formulation or change.
  - Disadvantage: This is a costly and challenging endeavour that is not a priority of the AEC.
- Establish institutionalized spaces and platforms within AEC bodies for the meaningful participation and regular engagement of civil society, especially women CSOs and marginalized groups and communities.
  - Advantage: This will provide the ASEAN leaders and policy makers grasp on issues of the common and marginalized ASEAN people, especially women.
  - Disadvantage: There is the danger of CSO cooptation.

### 3. Policy Recommendation

The policy options stated above are highly recommended. Although the problem of the AEC Blueprint lies fundamentally in its framework, recommending actions and mechanisms are both necessary to ensure that gaps are addressed. Also, the advantage of each policy option overrides its disadvantage.

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