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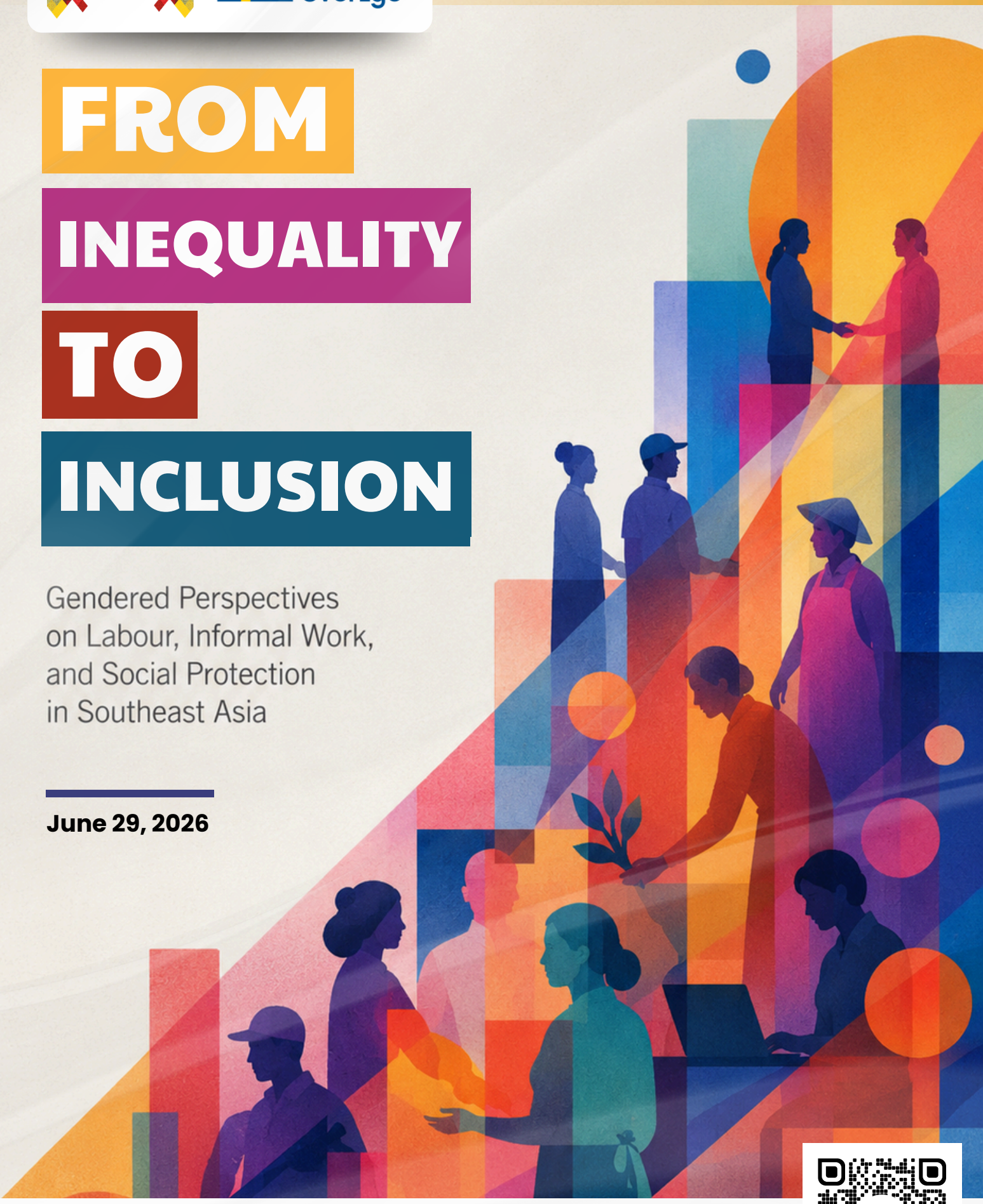
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CRITICAL HORIZONS WEBINAR

FROM INEQUALITY TO INCLUSION

Gendered Perspectives on Labour, Informal Work, and Social Protection in Southeast Asia

June 29, 2026



With institutional support from the following:

Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies
Mahidol University

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gender inequality continues to shape labour markets across Southeast Asia despite significant progress in labour legislation, gender mainstreaming initiatives, and regional commitments to gender equality. Women remain disproportionately represented in informal employment, continue to shoulder the majority of unpaid care work, and face persistent barriers in accessing decent work, social protection, and equal opportunities within the workplace. These challenges are further compounded by intersecting factors such as class, disability, age, migration status, and other forms of social inequality, underscoring the need for more inclusive and rights-based approaches to labour governance. The Critical Horizons webinar, From Inequality to Inclusion: Gender Perspectives on Labor, Informal Work, and Social Protection in Southeast Asia, brought together researchers and practitioners from Indonesia and the Philippines to examine these interconnected challenges from complementary perspectives.

The discussions explored structural gender inequality within formal and informal employment, the growing recognition of the care economy, the role of businesses in promoting gender-responsive labour practices, and recent legal developments concerning domestic and informal workers. Collectively, the presentations demonstrated that labour rights cannot be separated from broader questions of care, social protection, institutional governance, and human rights. A recurring theme throughout the webinar was that legal and policy reforms alone are insufficient to eliminate workplace inequality. While important progress has been made through regional frameworks and national legislation, implementation gaps, institutional biases, and unequal power relations continue to undermine women's ability to fully realise their rights.

Furthermore, the speakers emphasized the need for a shift from compliance-driven approaches towards structural reforms that recognise unpaid care work, strengthen protection for informal workers, integrate gender perspectives into business and human rights frameworks, and promote more inclusive labour governance across Southeast Asia. Ultimately, the webinar reaffirmed that advancing gender equality requires coordinated action among governments, businesses, employers, civil society organisations, researchers, and workers themselves. By centring intersectionality, recognising care work, and strengthening institutional accountability, labour governance can become more equitable, responsive, and capable of addressing the diverse realities experienced by women throughout the region.

This webinar report is prepared by SHAPE-SEA Secretariat:

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The webinar, **"Critical Horizons: From Inequality to Inclusion – Gender Perspectives on Labor, Informal Work, and Social Protection in Southeast Asia,"** was organized by the Strengthening Human Rights and Peace Research and Education in Southeast Asia (SHAPE-SEA) Programme as part of its **Critical Horizons webinar series.** The session provided a platform for researchers and practitioners to discuss emerging issues surrounding gender inequality, labor rights, informal work, the care economy, and social protection across Southeast Asia.

The discussion sought to examine how structural gender inequalities continue to shape labor markets, workplace policies, and legal protection mechanisms, particularly for women and other marginalized workers. Drawing on empirical research from Indonesia and the Philippines, the webinar explored the intersections between paid and unpaid care work, informal employment, business and human rights, and recent legal and policy developments within the region. Through presentations and panel discussions, the webinar aimed to encourage critical reflection on existing governance frameworks while identifying pathways toward more inclusive, gender-responsive, and rights-based labor policies.

The webinar was conducted online via **Zoom** and brought together researchers, academics, practitioners, civil society representatives, and students from across Southeast Asia. The session was moderated by **Associate Professor Dr. Sirijit Sunanta** (Mahidol University) and featured presentations by **Veronica Iswinahyu** (Indonesia), **Maecel Kayanan** (Dignity in Work for All, Philippines), and **Sahid Hadi** (Indonesia).

Participants were encouraged to actively engage throughout the webinar by contributing questions and reflections during the panel discussion. The event combined research presentations with an interactive Q&A session, creating space for dialogue on the practical implications of gender-responsive labor governance, care work, and social protection in Southeast Asia.

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Key Discussions and Messages

The webinar highlighted several overarching messages that are relevant for policymakers, businesses, researchers, and civil society organisations working to advance gender equality and labour rights in Southeast Asia.

⚙️ Gender inequality is structural rather than individual. Workplace inequalities are shaped by institutional arrangements, unequal power relations, and deeply embedded social norms rather than individual choices alone.

⚙️ Care work is fundamental to labour systems but remains largely invisible. The unequal distribution of unpaid care work continues to limit women's economic participation, while existing labour and business frameworks often fail to recognise its contribution to social and economic development.

⚙️ Legal recognition must be accompanied by effective implementation. Recent legislative developments, including legal protection for domestic workers, represent important progress but require stronger enforcement, institutional accountability, and gender-responsive implementation to ensure meaningful protection.

⚙️ Businesses have responsibilities beyond legal compliance. Gender-responsive workplace policies, care-supporting measures, and human rights due diligence should become integral components of corporate governance and supply chain management.

⚙️ Intersectionality is essential for inclusive labour governance. Effective labour policies must recognise the diverse experiences of women shaped by multiple and overlapping identities, including class, disability, ethnicity, age, migration status, and other forms of social inequality.

⚙️ Achieving gender equality requires collective action. Governments, employers, businesses, civil society organisations, trade unions, researchers, and workers all have important roles in creating labour systems that are equitable, rights-based, and responsive to the realities experienced by women across Southeast Asia.

A. Background

Across Southeast Asia, women continue to experience persistent inequalities in the world of work despite significant progress in labour legislation, gender mainstreaming policies, and regional commitments to gender equality. Structural barriers—including occupational segregation, unequal pay, limited access to social protection, workplace discrimination, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work—continue to shape women's participation in both formal and informal economies. These inequalities are further compounded by intersecting factors such as class, disability, ethnicity, migration status, and geographical location, resulting in unequal experiences that cannot be addressed through gender-neutral policies alone.

Recent regional developments have brought renewed attention to these issues. The growing recognition of the care economy, increasing discussions on business and human rights, and ongoing efforts to strengthen labour governance have highlighted the need for more inclusive approaches that recognise both productive and reproductive labour.

While governments across Southeast Asia have introduced legal reforms and policy initiatives to promote decent work and gender equality, implementation gaps remain significant, particularly for women working in informal sectors, domestic work, and other forms of precarious employment. These realities underscore the importance of examining labour rights not only through economic or legal perspectives but also through the broader lenses of social justice, human rights, and structural inequality.

Recognising these challenges, the SHAPE-SEA Critical Horizons Webinar Series convened the webinar "From Inequality to Inclusion: Gender Perspectives on Labor, Informal Work, and Social Protection in Southeast Asia" as a platform for regional dialogue among researchers, practitioners, and civil society organisations.

Through interdisciplinary discussions grounded in empirical research and policy analysis, the webinar sought to generate critical reflections on existing labour governance while identifying pathways towards more inclusive, gender-responsive, and rights-based approaches to employment and social protection.



B. Objectives

The webinar sought to provide a regional platform for critical dialogue on the structural dimensions of gender inequality in the world of work, with particular attention to labour rights, informal employment, care work, and social protection in Southeast Asia. By bringing together researchers, practitioners, and civil society actors, the discussion aimed to deepen understanding of how gender intersects with labour governance, business practices, and legal protection, while highlighting the experiences of women working across both formal and informal sectors.

The webinar also aimed to explore emerging regional perspectives on the care economy, business and human rights, and gender-responsive labour governance. Through empirical research and policy-oriented discussions, it examined how governments, businesses, and other stakeholders can contribute to more inclusive labour systems that recognise unpaid care work, strengthen social protection, and address structural barriers to gender equality.

More broadly, the webinar served as a platform for knowledge exchange and interdisciplinary reflection, encouraging participants to critically assess existing legal and institutional frameworks while identifying practical pathways towards more equitable, rights-based, and gender-responsive labour governance across Southeast Asia.



C. Presentations



Presentation 1: Gender Inequality in Formal and Informal Work
Delivered by: Veronica Iswinahyu
Project Lead, Dignity in Work for All, Indonesia

Understanding Gender Inequality in the World of Work

Gender inequality in the world of work extends beyond unequal employment opportunities and should be understood as a structural issue shaped by unequal power relations, institutional practices, and deeply embedded social norms.

It encompasses a wide range of interconnected challenges, including gender stereotyping, discrimination, harassment, gender-based violence, occupational segregation, unequal remuneration, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work. These inequalities affect workers across both formal and informal sectors by limiting equitable access to employment opportunities, workplace protection, occupational health and safety, social protection, and legal safeguards. Rather than occurring in isolation, workplace inequality is reinforced by intersecting social identities such as class, disability, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and age. An intersectional perspective is therefore essential for understanding how different groups of workers experience multiple and overlapping forms of disadvantage, requiring responses that move beyond gender-neutral approaches towards more inclusive and context-sensitive labour governance.

Structural Drivers of Workplace Inequality

Workplace inequality is frequently reproduced through organisational systems that appear gender-neutral but are designed without adequately considering women's lived experiences. While many organisations have adopted gender equality policies in response to national legislation, international labour standards, or buyer requirements, implementation often remains compliance-driven rather than transformative. Consequently, workplace systems continue to privilege dominant groups while overlooking women's reproductive health, caregiving responsibilities, workplace safety, and other gender-specific needs.

The presentation highlighted that organisational policies are often designed by decision-makers who remain detached from the everyday realities experienced by women workers. This disconnect contributes to institutional arrangements that formally promote equality while failing to address structural barriers embedded within workplace governance. As a result, gender-responsive policies frequently exist in principle but remain ineffective in practice due to limited awareness, weak implementation, and persistent institutional biases.

🔍 Manifestations of Gender Inequality in the Workplace

Dimension	Key Findings
Occupational segregation	Women are frequently concentrated in lower-paid and less secure occupations, while men dominate operational and supervisory roles associated with greater remuneration and career progression.
Unequal remuneration	Women often receive fixed wages with fewer opportunities to access productivity incentives, bonuses, or overtime earnings available to male workers.
Occupational health and safety	Workplace facilities and personal protective equipment are commonly designed around male workers, resulting in inadequate protection for women.
Social protection	Employment benefits frequently assume men as primary breadwinners, limiting women's access to family-based social protection and welfare benefits.
Unpaid care work	Women continue to shoulder disproportionate domestic and caregiving responsibilities, reducing opportunities for career advancement and economic participation.
Menstrual leave	Although legally recognised in Indonesia, menstrual leave remains inconsistently implemented and is often subject to additional scrutiny by employers, creating barriers to the effective enjoyment of this right.

Key Reflection

Gender inequality cannot be addressed solely through the adoption of formal workplace policies. Meaningful progress requires organisations to critically examine the structural assumptions embedded within labour governance, institutional culture, and decision-making processes. Advancing gender equality therefore demands gender-responsive workplace reforms that recognise women's diverse experiences, eliminate structural barriers, and integrate intersectional perspectives into employment policies, social protection systems, and organisational governance.



Presentation 2: Care Work, Business Responsibility, and the ASEAN Care Economy - Delivered by: Maecel Kayanan | Senior Program Manager, Dignity in Work for All Philippines

Understanding the Care Economy

The care economy encompasses the wide range of paid and unpaid activities that sustain individuals, households, and communities. It includes paid care workers such as nurses, domestic workers, childcare providers, and healthcare personnel, as well as unpaid care work performed within households, including childcare, eldercare, cooking, cleaning, and other forms of domestic labour. Beyond direct care activities, the care economy also relies on supporting infrastructure, including healthcare facilities, childcare centres, schools, transportation, and other public services that enable care work to take place.

Despite its fundamental contribution to economic productivity and social well-being, care work remains largely undervalued and disproportionately undertaken by women. As a result, the unequal distribution of care responsibilities continues to shape women's labour force participation, economic opportunities, and access to decent work across Southeast Asia.

Care Economy, Business, and Human Rights

The discussion highlighted that care work should not be understood solely as a household or government responsibility. Businesses also play a significant role in shaping care arrangements through employment policies, workplace practices, and supply chain governance. While business and human rights frameworks have increasingly addressed issues such as forced labour, occupational safety, and fair wages, care work remains largely absent from corporate human rights due diligence and accountability mechanisms. The presentation argued that employers influence workers' ability to balance paid employment and caregiving responsibilities through decisions relating to working hours, childcare support, healthcare provision, parental leave, housing, and other welfare measures.

Care Work within Plantation Communities

Plantation communities illustrate how labour governance extends beyond employment relationships into broader social and community life. Companies often provide housing, healthcare facilities, schools, childcare centres, and other essential services, creating integrated communities where employment conditions directly influence workers' well-being and family life.

Within these settings, women continue to undertake a disproportionate share of both paid and unpaid care work. In addition to their formal employment responsibilities, women frequently perform additional caregiving and domestic tasks that remain invisible within workplace systems and receive neither recognition nor compensation. These hidden responsibilities increase women's overall workload and reinforce structural inequalities within labour markets.

🔍 The 5R Framework for Decent Care Work

Principle	Description
Recognise	Acknowledge both paid and unpaid care work as essential economic and social contributions.
Reduce	Invest in infrastructure, technology, and public services that lessen excessive care burden.
Redistribute	Promote a more equitable sharing of care responsibilities among households, governments, employers, and communities.
Reward	Ensure decent wages, social protection, and fair working conditions for paid care workers.
Represent	Strengthen the participation and voice of care workers in decision-making and policy processes.

Key Reflection

Achieving gender equality requires recognising care work as a shared societal responsibility rather than an invisible obligation carried primarily by women. Strengthening the care economy therefore demands coordinated action from governments, businesses, and civil society to integrate care considerations into labour governance, social protection systems, and corporate human rights responsibilities. By making care work visible, valued, and fairly distributed, labour policies can become more inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the realities experienced by workers across Southeast Asia.

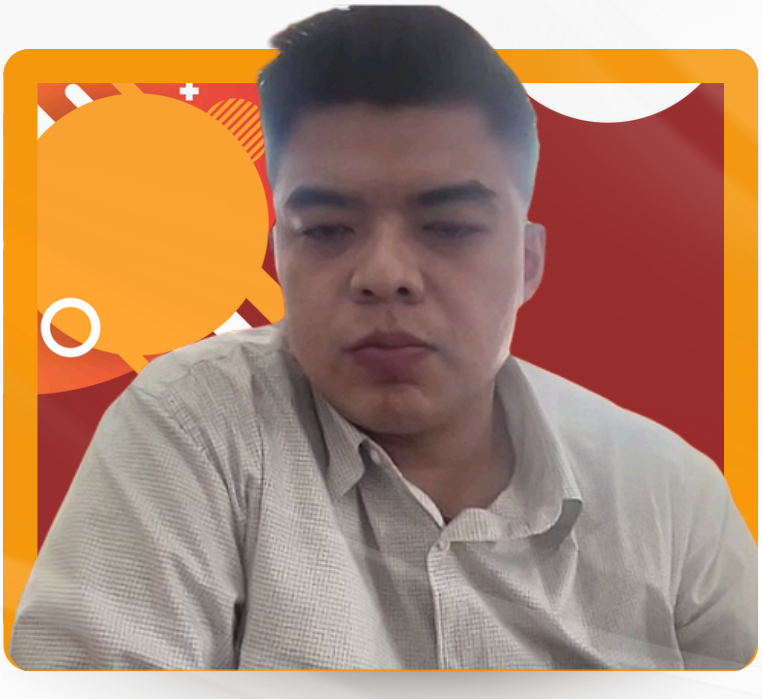
Presentation 3 : Informal Workers, Domestic Work, and Legal Protection in Indonesia
Delivered by: Sahid Hadi | Lecturer, Faculty of Law, Universitas Islam Indonesia
Researcher, Centre for Human Rights Studies

Informal Employment and Women's Structural Vulnerability

Indonesia's labour market continues to be characterised by a high proportion of informal employment, with more than half of the workforce relying on informal work as their primary source of livelihood. Women remain disproportionately represented within this sector, where employment is often characterised by low wages, insecure working conditions, limited access to social protection, and the absence of formal employment rights. These conditions expose women to multiple and overlapping vulnerabilities, particularly as many continue to shoulder the majority of unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities alongside income-generating work.

The presentation illustrated these realities through the experience of a former garment worker who entered informal employment following redundancy. Her story demonstrated how the loss of formal employment can quickly lead to broader economic insecurity, forcing workers to accept precarious jobs while simultaneously managing household responsibilities and caregiving obligations. Rather than representing an isolated experience, the case reflected the structural vulnerabilities faced by millions of informal workers across Indonesia.

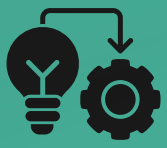
Legal Protection for Informal and Domestic Workers



Although Indonesia has introduced various labour regulations, existing legal frameworks have historically focused on formal employment relationships, leaving informal workers with limited legal protection. The enactment of Law No. 2 of 2026 on Domestic Workers therefore represents an important milestone by formally recognising domestic workers as workers entitled to legal protection and establishing a legal basis for employment relationships within domestic work.

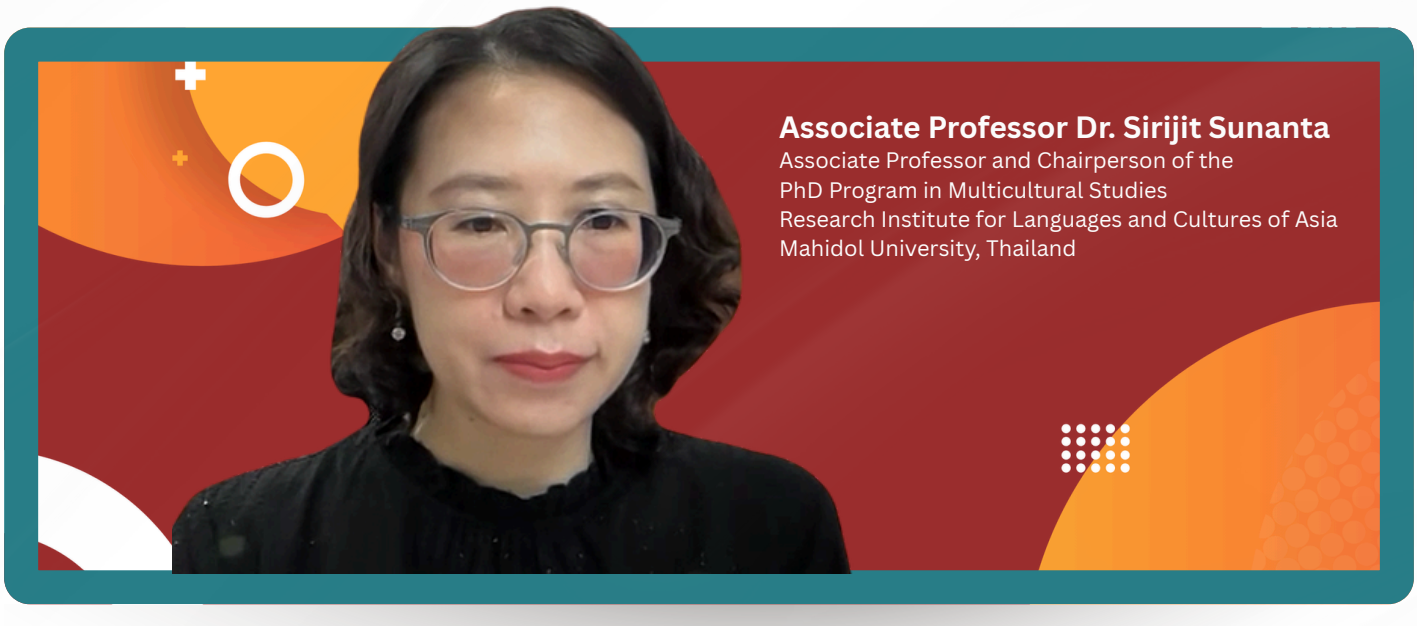
The presentation acknowledged that the law introduces important protections, including written employment agreements, recognition of labour rights, occupational safety, social security, and welfare provisions. However, it also argued that many of these protections remain dependent upon individual agreements between employers and domestic workers, limiting their effectiveness in practice given the unequal bargaining power that characterises domestic employment relationships.

🔍 Critical Assessment of Law No. 2 of 2026 on Domestic Workers

Legal Provision / Issue		Key Observation
Recognition of domestic workers		The law formally recognises domestic workers as workers entitled to legal protection, representing a significant advancement in Indonesia's labour legislation.
Employment agreements		Several fundamental employment conditions, including wages, leave, and working arrangements, continue to rely on private agreements rather than statutory minimum standards.
Workers' rights		The law recognises rights relating to welfare, occupational safety, and social security, although implementation mechanisms remain relatively limited.
Gender perspective		The legislation adopts a gender-neutral approach despite domestic work being predominantly performed by women, resulting in limited recognition of gender-specific vulnerabilities.
Dispute resolution		Community-based dispute resolution mechanisms may not adequately protect domestic workers due to unequal bargaining power between employers and workers.
Implementation		Effective protection will depend largely on enforcement, institutional capacity, and public awareness rather than legal recognition alone.

Key Reflection

The enactment of Law No. 2 of 2026 on Domestic Workers marks a significant step towards improving legal recognition for one of Indonesia's most vulnerable groups of workers. Nevertheless, legal recognition alone is insufficient to guarantee substantive protection. Strengthening labour governance requires effective implementation, gender-responsive enforcement mechanisms, accessible complaint procedures, and stronger statutory standards capable of addressing the structural inequalities experienced by informal and domestic workers. Future labour reforms should therefore move beyond formal recognition towards ensuring that workers are able to meaningfully exercise their rights in practice.



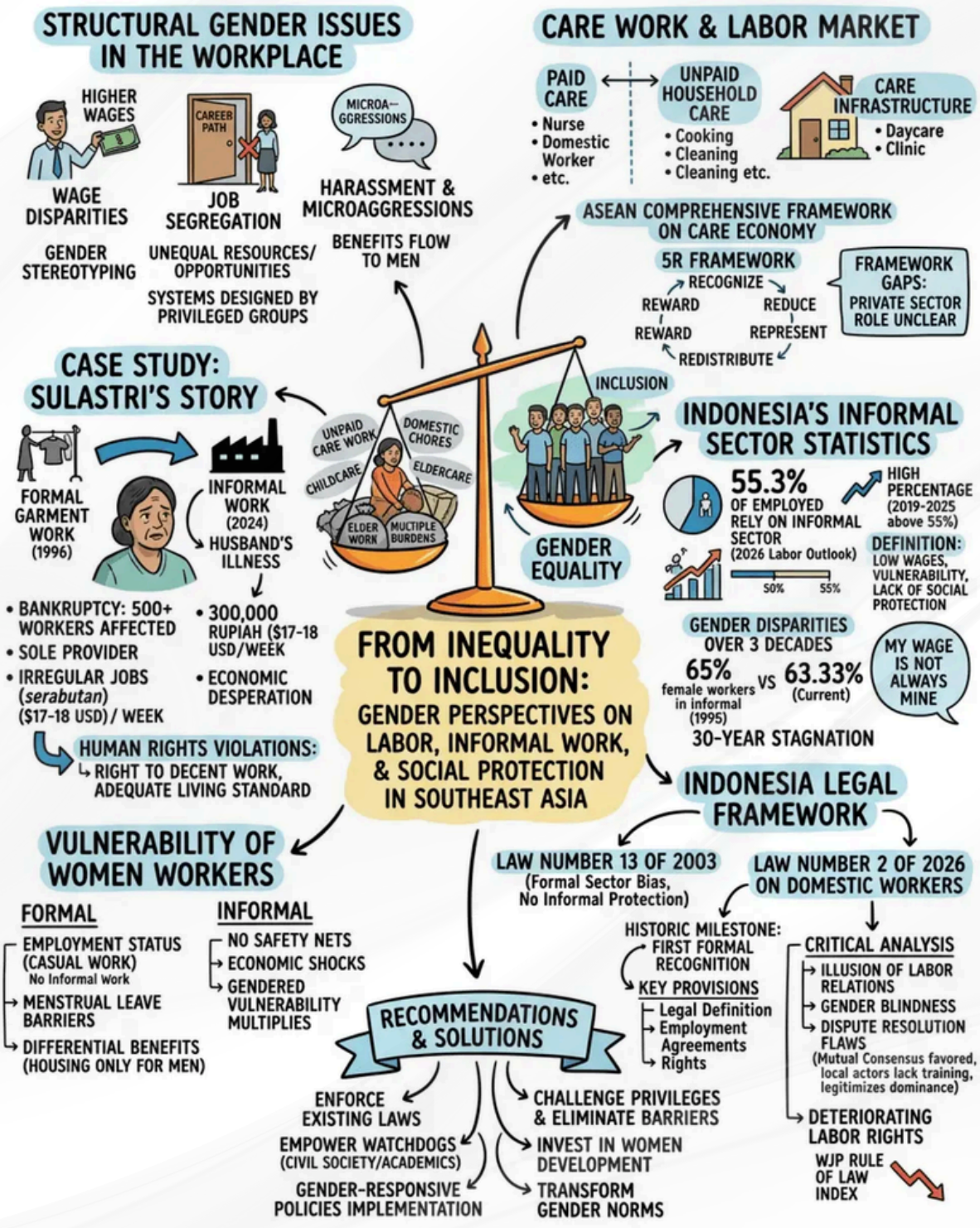
Brief Situation of Care Work and Labour in Thailand

Delivered by Associate Professor Dr. Sirijit Sunanta
Chairperson of the PhD Program in Multicultural Studies, Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University, Thailand

Ajarn Sirijit Sunanta shared research on women working in Thailand's wellness and hospitality sector, focusing on masseuses serving the tourism industry, which she framed as a form of care work — labor that makes others feel more comfortable. She explained that these workers are considered informal because they're paid per session or hour rather than a fixed salary, which excludes them from legal protections like Social Security Article 33. This informality stems from the volatility of tourism income (starkly illustrated by COVID-19), with employers passing that income risk onto workers instead of absorbing it themselves. She also noted an intersectionality of marginalization, as these workers are often already disadvantaged by low education and older age, limiting their alternative options.

In the Q&A, a participant asked whether Thailand's informal setup gives masseuses more financial flexibility, and how policy could protect them while preserving that flexibility. Ajarn Sirijit responded that flexibility is inherent to tourism-sector work in Thailand, and that addressing worker vulnerability requires collaboration among employers, workers, and government agencies rather than any single party acting alone.

She proposed a "sandbox" pilot toward formalizing parts of the informal sector — for example, motivating employers to hire masseuses on a regular basis rather than paying only per session while also expecting uncompensated extra labor like cleaning venues and massage rooms. She raised the question of whether fixed regulations, hours, and income could help, while acknowledging any such arrangement would need to be negotiated among stakeholders.



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The visual notes above were AI-supported and developed to illustrate the key discussions and insights shared during the webinar. They serve as a visual summary of the session and are intended to enhance understanding and engagement, rather than as a verbatim record of the discussion.

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES



Structural Gender Inequality Beyond the Workplace. A central theme emerging across the webinar was that gender inequality should not be understood merely as a workplace issue, but as a structural phenomenon shaped by unequal power relations, institutional arrangements, and social norms.

Across both formal and informal sectors, women continue to experience overlapping forms of disadvantage, including occupational segregation, unequal remuneration, limited access to social protection, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work. These inequalities are further compounded by intersecting factors such as class, disability, age, migration status, and other social identities, underscoring the importance of adopting intersectional approaches in labour governance and policy development.



Recognising Care Work as an Essential Component of Labour Governance. The discussions consistently highlighted the need to move beyond conventional understandings of labour by recognising care work as an integral component of economic and social systems.

Although care work sustains households, communities, and labour markets, much of it remains unpaid, invisible, and disproportionately undertaken by women. The webinar emphasised that achieving gender equality requires greater recognition of care work within labour policies, social protection systems, and business practices, while promoting a more equitable redistribution of care responsibilities among governments, employers, communities, and households.



Bridging Legal Recognition and Effective Protection. Another recurring theme concerned the gap between legal recognition and the effective realisation of workers' rights. While important legislative and policy developments have been introduced across the region—including recent legal reforms protecting domestic workers—participants acknowledged that formal recognition alone does not automatically guarantee substantive protection.

Weak implementation, unequal bargaining power, and limited enforcement mechanisms continue to undermine workers' ability to exercise their rights in practice. Strengthening labour governance therefore requires not only legislative reform but also institutional accountability, accessible grievance mechanisms, and gender-responsive implementation.

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES



Expanding Business Responsibility Beyond Compliance. The webinar also challenged conventional understandings of corporate responsibility by emphasising that businesses influence workers' well-being beyond wages and working conditions. Employment policies, workplace arrangements, housing, childcare, healthcare provision, and broader supply chain practices all shape workers' ability to balance productive and reproductive responsibilities. Consequently, business responsibility should extend beyond legal compliance towards integrating gender equality, care work, and human rights due diligence into corporate governance and supply chain management.



Towards Inclusive and Gender-Responsive Labour Governance. Collectively, the presentations demonstrated that advancing gender equality requires comprehensive and coordinated action involving governments, employers, businesses, civil society organisations, trade unions, and workers themselves.

Inclusive labour governance should move beyond gender-neutral approaches by recognising the diverse experiences of women across different forms of employment while addressing the structural barriers that continue to perpetuate inequality. Strengthening participation, improving social protection, recognising care work, and embedding intersectional perspectives into labour policies were identified as critical pathways towards more equitable and rights-based labour governance across Southeast Asia.

Key Observations and Takeaways

The webinar generated several key observations that are relevant to future labour governance and gender equality initiatives across Southeast Asia:

💬 Gender inequality remains a structural challenge embedded within labour markets, organisational systems, and broader social institutions rather than an issue affecting individual workers alone.

💬 Unpaid care work continues to be systematically undervalued despite its essential contribution to sustaining households, communities, and economic productivity.

💬 Informal and domestic workers remain among the least protected groups within existing labour governance frameworks, highlighting persistent implementation and enforcement gaps.

Key Observations and Takeaways

💬Legal reforms constitute important milestones but must be accompanied by effective implementation, institutional accountability, and accessible mechanisms that enable workers to realise their rights in practice.

💬Businesses play an increasingly important role in advancing gender equality by integrating care considerations, human rights due diligence, and gender-responsive workplace policies throughout their operations and supply chains.

💬 Achieving inclusive labour governance requires coordinated action among governments, employers, businesses, civil society, researchers, and workers, supported by intersectional and rights-based approaches that respond to the diverse realities experienced by women across Southeast Asia.



🔍 Policy Recommendations

Policy Focus		Recommendations
Governments		Strengthen the implementation and enforcement of labour legislation, expand access to social protection, and integrate gender-responsive and intersectional approaches into labour governance.
Employers and Businesses		Incorporate gender equality, care work, and human rights due diligence into workplace policies, employment practices, and supply chain governance while investing in family-friendly and care-supporting measures.
Trade Unions and Civil Society		Strengthen advocacy, worker representation, legal assistance, and awareness-raising initiatives, particularly for women engaged in informal and domestic work.
Academic and Research Institutions		Generate interdisciplinary and evidence-based research that informs labour policy, business practice, and gender-responsive governance while strengthening regional knowledge exchange.
Regional Organisations		Promote greater collaboration among ASEAN Member States to advance inclusive labour policies, recognise the care economy, and strengthen protection for vulnerable workers through regional dialogue and policy cooperation.

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

Participants took part in three interactive Mentimeter activities during the webinar: a word association exercise on gender inequality in work, an open-ended reflection on priority actions and policies, and a poll on topics for future learning. This report clusters and summarises their responses. Together, the results point to a clear message from the audience: the region does not lack laws or frameworks on gender equality, but it does lack consistent implementation, recognition of care and informal work, and social protection systems that reach the women who need them most.

🤔 What comes to mind when you hear “gender inequality in work”?

Participants were asked to share, in one or two words, their immediate associations with the phrase “gender inequality in work”. The word most frequently submitted, and the clear centre of the word cloud, was discrimination. Around it, responses clustered into four broad themes.



Discrimination, bias, and stereotyping.
Beyond the dominant response of discrimination, participants named bias, stereotyping, labelling, favouritism, unfairness, and disempowerment. These responses frame gender inequality first and foremost as a matter of how women are perceived and treated in the workplace.

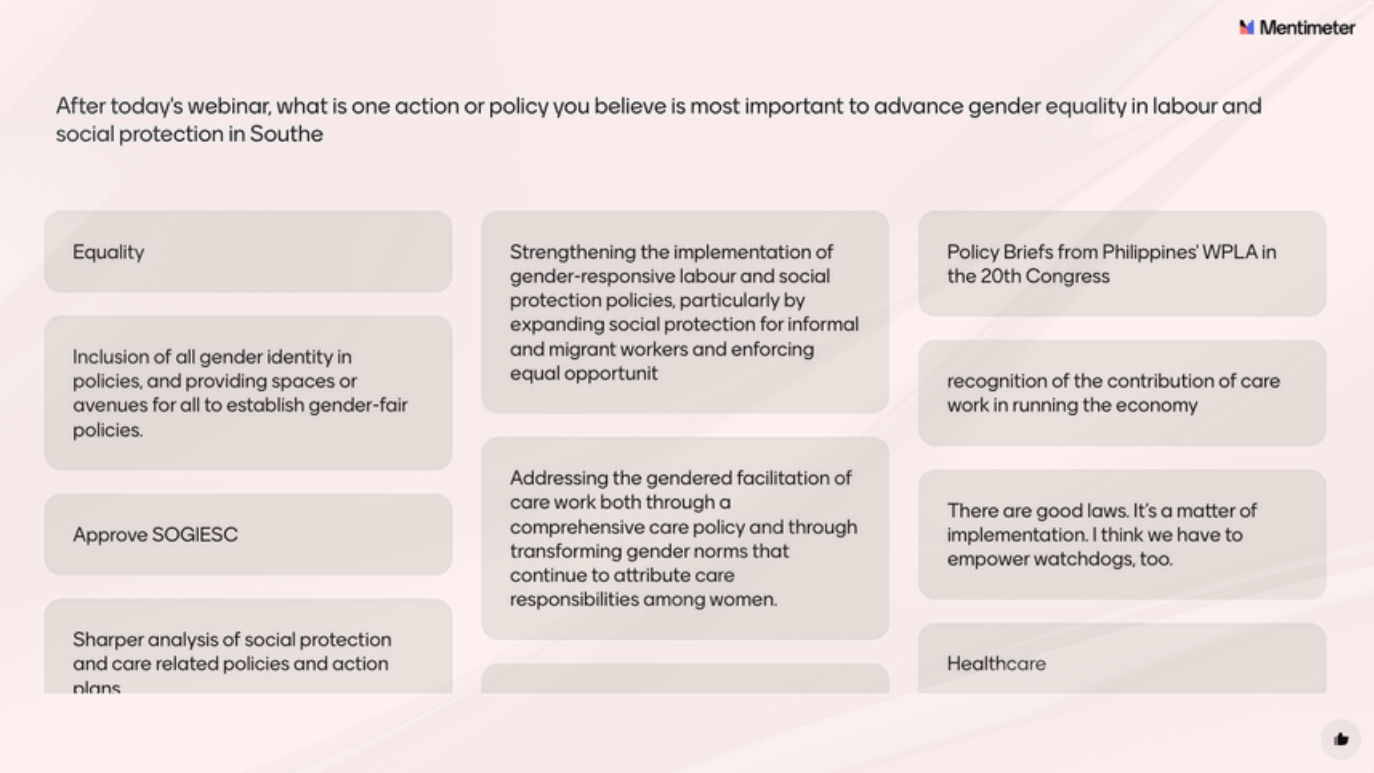
Unequal pay and blocked advancement
A second cluster pointed to the economic dimensions of inequality: unequal pay, the pay gap, the glass ceiling, lack of promotion, underrepresentation, and deprivation. Participants see inequality not only in day-to-day treatment but in the structures that limit women's earnings and career progression.

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

Care work and the maternal penalty
Several responses connected inequality at work to responsibilities at home: unpaid care work, the maternal penalty, the absence of childcare facilities, and the difficulty of securing promotion as a mother. This theme anticipated one of the strongest threads in the later discussion on policy priorities.

Working conditions and enabling environments. A final group of responses described the conditions that sustain inequality: unequal task delegation, the weight of workloads, and the absence of an enabling environment. A smaller number of participants offered aspirational responses, including kind treatment, balance and no discrimination at work.

🤔 What action or policy matters most for gender equality in labour and social protection?



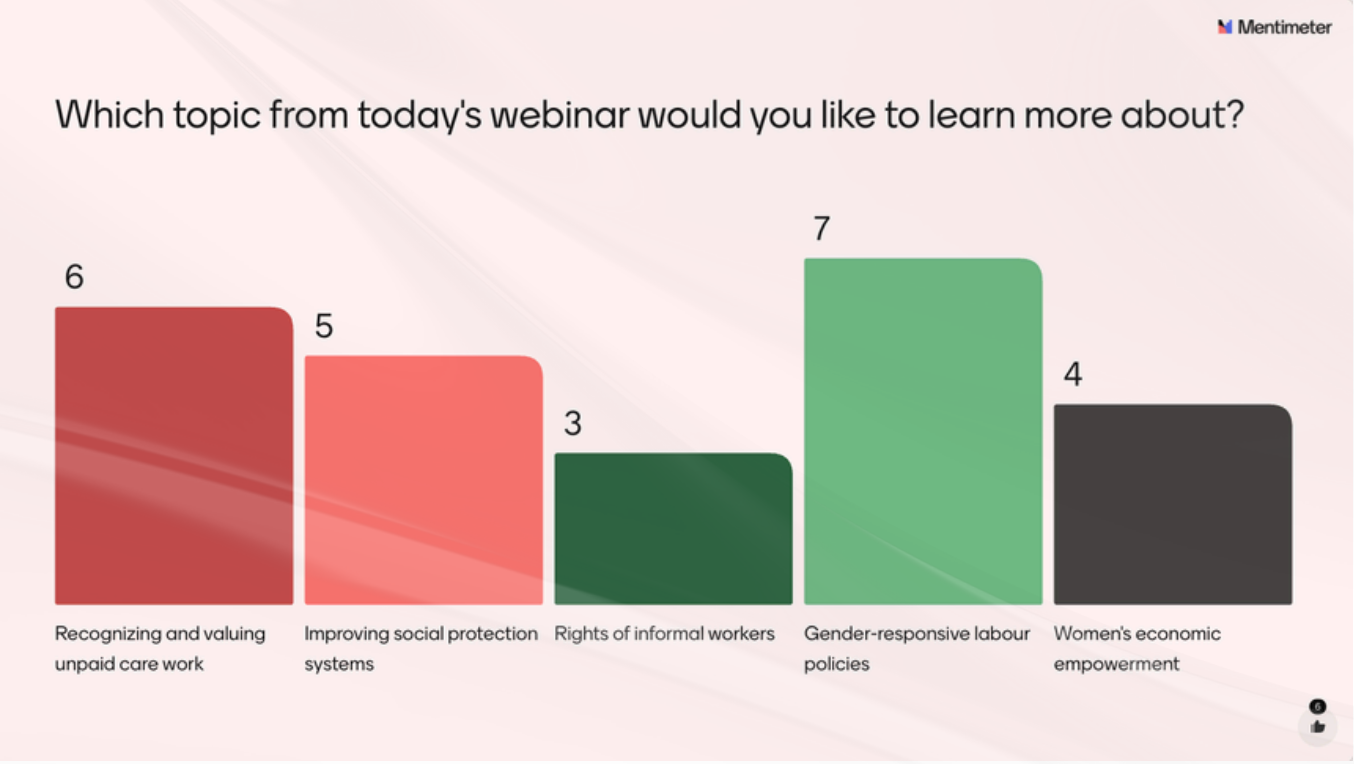
Participants were asked to identify one action or policy they believe is most important to advance gender equality in labour and social protection in Southeast Asia. Their responses converged around several key priorities, with the strongest emphasis on implementing and enforcing existing laws rather than creating new ones. Many stressed that effective monitoring, stronger accountability mechanisms, and greater awareness among policymakers are needed to ensure gender-responsive legislation translates into meaningful outcomes. Participants also highlighted the urgent need to extend social protection to informal and migrant workers by making benefits portable, recognising informal labour within economic policy, and ensuring equal opportunities for workers in non-standard forms of employment.

Care work likewise emerged as a central concern, with respondents calling for its recognition as an essential contributor to the economy through comprehensive care policies, equitable compensation, and efforts to transform gender norms that disproportionately place caregiving responsibilities on women.

Participants also emphasised investing in women's economic empowerment by expanding access to financial inclusion, entrepreneurship, leadership opportunities, healthcare, and support for women-led micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Taken together, these responses reflect a shared view that achieving gender equality in Southeast Asia requires not only stronger policy implementation but also more inclusive, equitable, and responsive labour and social protection systems.

🤔 Which topic would participants like to learn more about?

In the closing poll, participants voted on the webinar topic they would most like to explore further. Twenty-five votes were cast across five options.



Gender-responsive labour policies drew the most interest, followed closely by recognising and valuing unpaid care work. The relatively even spread across all five topics suggests a broad appetite for continued learning across the full agenda of the webinar, and offers a useful signal for the design of future sessions.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

🌿 Discrimination remains the defining word participants attach to gender inequality in work, alongside unequal pay, the maternal penalty, and unpaid care work.

🌿 The strongest policy message from the audience was to implement and monitor existing laws, with empowered watchdogs and better-informed policymakers, rather than to legislate anew.

🌿 Extending portable social protection to informal and migrant workers was seen as the most urgent structural reform, so that protection follows the worker rather than the job.

🌿 Participants want care work recognised as an economic contribution, supported by comprehensive care policy and a transformation of the gender norms that assign care to women.

🌿 Gender-responsive labour policies and unpaid care work top the list of topics participants want to learn more about, providing clear direction for follow-up activities.

Informality in Southeast Asia's tourism and care economies functions as a deliberate risk-transfer mechanism rather than a neutral labor arrangement. Because tourism income is inherently volatile, shaped by shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic, employers avoid absorbing that uncertainty themselves by structuring pay around hours or sessions rather than fixed salaries — shifting the burden of income instability onto workers, who are disproportionately women and often already marginalized by lower education or older age. The broader lesson is that closing gender and protection gaps in the region's service economies demands policy design that treats flexibility and worker security as negotiable trade-offs to be solved together, not opposing goods.

SHAPE-SEA would also like to extend our sincere appreciation to Associate Professor Dr. Sirijit Sunanta (Mahidol University) for moderating the session and enriching the discussion by sharing perspectives from the Thai context. Her insights helped situate the issues within Thailand while drawing meaningful connections across Southeast Asia, enabling participants to better map the regional landscape of gender equality, labour, and social protection.



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