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Addressing Unpaid Care Work in ASEAN

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Forewords



The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) turned to its strong partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Committee on Women and the ASEAN Secretariat to prepare this analytical report to encourage gender-responsive policies when responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially within the care economy. The report examines the gendered political economy context as well as the gender-responsive and care-sensitive policy measures in ASEAN countries. While the report illustrates many good practices, concrete care policy actions that could accelerate and strengthen the actions needed to “build back equal” are also suggested.

The disproportionate distribution of unpaid care and domestic work is one of the root causes of the persistent inequalities. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, women and girls in the Asia-Pacific region already performed more than four times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men and boys. If there is a silver lining to the ongoing pandemic, it may be that the role of women and girls as front-line health care workers and as caregivers for home-schooling children as well as sick or elderly family members has come into the spotlight.

We have taken the first essential step on the journey towards greater equality by recognizing unpaid care and domestic work and its invaluable contribution to the functioning of our societies and economies. But we must work to further understand and better measure and enumerate unpaid care and domestic work to make these contributions clear and visible.

With this increasing recognition, it is now time to turn our attention to realize the twin-track policy solutions to reduce and redistribute unpaid care and domestic work. Investing in and building up care infrastructure - such as provisions for safe water and sanitation, cooking fuel, food procurement, transport and utility infrastructure - can reduce the time spent on these daily subsistence tasks. A mix of policies is needed to enable women and men to better reconcile the time requirements of the workplace with those of unpaid care work at home, including parental leave, care leave, care insurance schemes and flexible work arrangements.

I look forward to following the ASEAN countries on their accelerated journey towards the realization of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. And I hope that this report will contribute to sustaining the momentum that has been inadvertently created by the COVID-19 pandemic to address and improve the conditions for women and girls at home and in the workplace.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Salsiah'.

Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana

Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations
and Executive Secretary of ESCAP



I congratulate the ASEAN Committee on Women and ESCAP for valiantly undertaking the development of this pioneering report. At a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has convincingly revealed gender imbalances within and outside our homes, the publication of this report could not have come at a more opportune time.

The report amply describes the state of unpaid care work in the ASEAN region. Despite data challenges, it is able to piece together the multiple responsibilities shouldered by women and girls that continue to be unrecognized and unremunerated. More significantly, it invites our attention to those who face the greatest risk of being left behind, such as women and girls living in rural areas with limited or no access to care infrastructure.

The report also provides a framework that would facilitate our understanding of the nuances of care work and its intersections with other issues. In the report, we see the nexus between informality – where women are overly represented in the informal sector – and migration as both forces bear upon and are conversely shaped by the care responsibilities of women and girls.

The strength of this report lies with the concrete recommendations that decision-makers and various stakeholders can consider in developing and designing policies and programmes. By looking at care infrastructure, care-related social protection, care services and employment-related policies, the interlinked policy areas are unpacked and the concomitant policy actions are outlined. Such considerations may well inform and contribute to the articulation and reflection of care economy considerations in national development planning of ASEAN Member States in the near future.

Looking ahead, the report provides signposts on seizing the opportunity to fully recognize, reduce and redistribute care work. This will be critical as ASEAN moves towards the recovery stage from the pandemic. Add to this the pace by which societies in the ASEAN region are ageing, as well as the advances in technology and digital innovations. All of this necessitate a shift in cultural norms: to appreciate the provision of care as being a public good.

It is my hope that the readers of this report will find the data and analysis useful and that it may lead to concrete and collective actions that will lead to comprehensively addressing unpaid care work in the ASEAN region.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Kung Phoak'.

Kung Phoak
Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN
for ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community

ASEAN is committed to achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the region. While the gendered division of work and disproportionate care responsibilities are nothing of novelty, addressing and tackling such matters at the policy level are considered pioneering in ASEAN. The gender gap in unpaid care and domestic work has greatly affected women's ability to engage in labour markets and has aggravated time poverty for women. Left unaddressed and invisible, the gender gap will lead to regression in our progress on advancing women's economic empowerment, of which the dominant narrative has focused primarily on paid and productive sectors.



At the First ASEAN Women's Leaders' Summit: Women's Role in Building a Cohesive, Dynamic, Sustainable and Inclusive ASEAN Community in a Post-COVID-19 World (in November 2020), the leaders strengthened ASEAN's commitment to enhancing women's participation in decision-making processes with a multistakeholder and cross-pillar approach. Such commitment translates to recognizing and redistributing unpaid care and domestic work, specifically in designing gender-responsive policies; improving women's access to opportunities and responding to emerging challenges; and building resilience by strengthening women's economic empowerment through digital and financial inclusion. These actions require investing in gender-responsive public and social infrastructure and ensuring that women are the architects as well as the beneficiaries of efforts to build back stronger and better.

On 3 December 2020, the ASEAN Committee on Women (ACW) and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific jointly convened the Web Forum on Enhancing Women's Economic Empowerment in ASEAN Countries. This partnership facilitated greater understanding of participatory gender-responsive approaches to measures that promote women's economic empowerment. It also established a platform for sharing lessons learned and good practices across ASEAN and the whole Asia-Pacific region. One of the recommendations arising from the web forum is to further investigate and unpack the care economy towards promoting greater gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls.

The Web Forum on Care Matters: Addressing Unpaid Care and Domestic Work in ASEAN Countries that took place on the sidelines of the 19th ACW meeting in December 2020, stimulated a discussion on how family care and social protection policies can contribute to the recognition, reduction, redistribution and representation of unpaid care and domestic work, thus consequently lead to a more gender-transformative labour market.

It is imperative that we address the root causes of the unequal distribution of caring responsibilities, among which is the entrenched gender norms and stereotypes that permeate our societies. The ACW Work Plan 2021–2025, under the thematic area of women's economic empowerment and future of work, recognizes the disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work traditionally shouldered by women. The thematic area aims to ensure that women have equal opportunities in participating productively in the economy as employees, entrepreneurs and employers and through equal access to education, decent work, secure income, business opportunities and access to finance and social protection.

This report takes stock of the situation of unpaid care and domestic work performed by women in the ASEAN region. It examines the extent of socioeconomic, political, legislative and institutional conditions and promising policy measures that have been put in place by ASEAN Member States. The report also proposes recommendations to introduce a care-sensitive dimension into national and regional gender policies towards building back better and a more equal post-pandemic world.

As highlighted in the report, the presence of the necessary national and regional institutional mechanisms is promising and provides a ready framework that can be leveraged by governments. I hope that the recommendations presented will serve as a reference to support the ongoing effort within ASEAN to incorporate the care economy into national development planning, which necessitates a whole-of-government approach and regional cooperation. This is to ensure gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls towards realizing a caring, prosperous and sustainable ASEAN Community.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kheng Samvada'.

Kheng Samvada

Permanent Secretary of State, Ministry of Women's Affairs, Cambodia
Chair of the ASEAN Committee on Women

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The publication was peer reviewed by Joni Simpson, Senior Specialist on Gender, Equality and Non-Discrimination, ILO.

Karen Emmons edited the report, and Daniel Feary designed the publication.

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