



**43<sup>RD</sup> GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
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Phnom Penh, Cambodia**

*Advancing Together for Sustainable, Inclusive and Resilient ASEAN*

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**EXPLANATORY NOTE ON  
GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT FOR A  
SUSTAINABLE, INCLUSIVE AND RESILIENT COVID-19 RECOVERY**

*Sponsored by Cambodia*

**OVERVIEW**

The COVID-19 global pandemic has impacted substantial changes as well as intertwined challenges and opportunities, particularly in the Southeast Asian region. More specifically, the global pandemic outbreak has significant implications for gender equality and inclusion during the downturn and the subsequent recovery. A significant negative impact of the pandemic and diverse economies has made this region face increasing challenges that require joint efforts and strong commitment from AIPA member countries to solve together. Despite complex and interconnected issues and challenges related to this pandemic, the cooperation for sustainable development, and inclusive growth still prevails in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) framework. This strong cooperative commitment aims to reduce gender inequalities and healthy economic development by addressing and promoting women's digital empowerment as well as an inclusive, sustainable, and resilient recovery.

The issues mentioned above shall be discussed at the 43<sup>rd</sup> AIPA General Assembly that the National Assembly of the Kingdom of Cambodia will physically host from 20 to 25 November 2022 in Phnom Penh, the Kingdom of Cambodia, under the guiding theme **“Advancing Together for Sustainable, Inclusive and Resilient ASEAN”**.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has caused a significant challenge for human security, especially a health and economic crisis impacting individuals differently by exacerbating existing economic inequalities (worldwide, men own 50 % more wealth than women due to the fact that more women are employed in lower-skilled and lower-paying jobs than men) and potentially worsening gender discrimination [1]. On an economic level, most people's live and work have been negatively affected by the pandemic, especially women's jobs and livelihoods are more vulnerable to the crisis. The magnitude of the inequality is noticeable, as globally women's job loss rates due to the pandemic are about 1.8 times higher than men's job loss rate 5.7% versus 3.1% respectively [2].

While in the ASEAN region, 56% of women participate in the workforce, and of those employed in vulnerable and the informal sector estimated 67% and 3% are employed but live in poverty with limited access to benefits and social protection [1, 3]. Furthermore, ASEAN is also the most disaster-prone region in the world (for the year 2020, disasters in the 10 ASEAN countries affected 19.3 million people, displaced 2.4 million, and caused damages worth \$227.4 million), this situation places women among the groups who have the least capacity to respond to natural and health hazards [1, 4]. This situation also tends to trap women into poverty, even though women contribute substantially to economic welfare through

large amounts of unpaid care and domestic work in addition to work outside the home. As a result, the unpaid care work performed by women accounts for the equivalent of \$10.8 trillion based on Oxfam's recent released report [1].

In addition, women are mainly on the wrong side of the digital divide. According to the 2020 Asia Foundation study, the gender digital divide threatens to keep ASEAN women beyond the reach of the many possibilities and paths to prosperity that science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and digital technologies offer: "First, women lag behind men in access to digital technology and the internet [5, p.36]. Women are also disadvantaged in accessing resources that would help them learn how to use digital technologies; therefore, the lack of women in STEM cuts off the pipeline of potential female workers with the skills needed to design and create digital technologies, as well as women in leadership and decision-making roles in the digital sector [5, p.36].

WAIPA can play a crucial role in enhancing women leaders' and people's awareness and acknowledging that women are an untapped potential for ASEAN growth. Therefore, empowerment of women and girls and gender equality are the prerequisites to building an inclusive and dynamic ASEAN community, achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for all, and ensuring no one is left behind. More precisely, WAIPA could:

**Work on activities to secure jobs and decent work for all so every woman can fulfill her potential.** Investing in public childcare services and child support could free up time for women to access formal work and create new job opportunities in the care industry. Increasing spending on social protection policies, ensuring paid maternity leave, and access to maternity protection for all women in the formal and informal sector, as well as a paid paternity leave could cushion the socio-economic impact on women from the pandemic and other challenges like poverty, migration, disasters, and climate change impact [6]. Additionally, AIPA Member Parliaments also have an important role to play in promoting gender equality and the participation, representation, and leadership of women and girls in policy spaces and decision-making at all levels, including in recovery plans from the pandemic [7, 8]. AIPA could lead by example in having gender parity in its national delegations. As there are no guidelines in AIPA to date regarding how parliamentarians are chosen by their national parliaments to become AIPA members, AIPA statute related to the number of women MPs in national delegations could be amended [9].

**Work on activities to support digital investment for women and girls, ensure equitable access to technology and promote digital literacy and skills to avoid further widening digital divides.** Suppose the rise of digital technologies generates new uses and opportunities. In that case, these technologies should be accompanied by educational policies in order to train the most disadvantaged women in mastering of fundamental digital tools. The rapid move to digital education and distance learning during the pandemic can be used to strengthen women's connectivity and mobility, for example, by bolstering partnerships between businesses, educational institutions, and governments in developing competency-based curricula and critical skills [10]. Promoting of women's access to, and use of, information and communications technology (ICT) for greater participation in managing disaster risk reduction and pandemics is also essential to help accelerate progress on all the SDGs.

**Work to build women's resilience to the increasing risks of simultaneous or complex disasters, viruses, and natural hazards.** Building women's resilience requires a multi-hazard, inclusive, and holistic approach to society that takes into account gender, income inequality, geography, age, and other socioeconomic factors determining the impact of these events on people [11]. In this perspective, Parliaments could reassess and reform social welfare systems with laws and policies addressing the existing gender inequalities and being inclusive to ensure that no one is left behind. They could also exercise oversight over the executive branch to ensure governments provide adequate public spending for disaster risk reduction and make climate finance more gender responsive. Finally, in line with the Regional Framework and Action Plan on Implementing the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection

adopted in 2015, as well as the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025, WAIPA could advocate to increase the importance of women's participation and leadership in disaster risk management, climate change adaptation planning, and decision-making at all levels to enhance the resilience of vulnerable people to disaster and climate change.

With the expansion of digital marketing and digital transformation of educational programs, the pandemic can be an opportunity to address digital divides and make digital governance a positive force for gender equality and inclusion. In line with the Action Agenda on Mainstreaming Women's Economic Empowerment adopted by the ASEAN in 2017 as well as with the ASEAN Committee on Women's Work Plan (ACW) 2021 – 2025, empowering women in smart digital skills across ASEAN is particularly important to integrate women into a digital economy-based labor market.

AIPA has recognized the importance of creating spaces for dialogue on gender issues in the region. Therefore, WAIPA will be continued to discuss gender issues and women's empowerment for sustainability and inclusion, ensuring equality for all women and men in terms of education and STEM subjects for secure jobs and decent work for all and building women's resilience economically.

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