



ASEAN's Gender Inequality in Education

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Abstract

As education is one of the first basic human rights and schools have unparalleled abilities to educate, cultivate, and instill the value system into children as they grow and learn to become productive members of society, this study examines the overall landscape of gender inequality specifically in the educational context within Southeast Asia. The study also explores the status of gender inequality in ASEAN and investigates both explicit and implicit gender-related issues found in primary, secondary, and tertiary educations. The primary data are gathered from the school visits in Thailand, gender expert interviews, and teachers' surveys from ASEAN member countries, which were conducted by the Center for Philanthropy and Civil Society (CPCS), National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA). The results corroborate the gender situation in ASEAN in that gender inequality in education still exists in great lengths. Gender roles, norms, and stereotypes widely dictate people's way of life and practices. Gender hierarchy where males are considered superior and the patriarchal structure remain in the front row seat in almost all areas of life. In consequence, the education system in Thailand and other Southeast Asian

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countries are in serious need of a radical change and reform. It would benefit from gender mainstreaming policy, including direct policy interventions in educational curricula, textbooks, school's staff and faculty's understanding and perceptions of gender issues, and other school practices. Meanwhile, the promotion of gender equality must also be a priority.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, ASEAN, Gender Hierarchy, Education, Sexual Violence



ความไม่เท่าเทียมทางเพศในภูมิภาค เอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อสำรวจสถานภาพของความไม่เท่าเทียมทางเพศในสถาบันการศึกษาในภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ เนื่องจากสถาบันการศึกษามีบทบาทความสำคัญในการสั่งสอนหล่อหลอม และเสริมสร้างให้เยาวชนเติบโตเป็นพลเมืองที่มีคุณภาพต่อสังคม ดังนั้นประเด็นเรื่องความไม่เท่าเทียมทางเพศจึงมีส่วนสำคัญในระบบการศึกษาทุกระดับ งานวิจัยนี้ใช้ข้อมูลจากทิมวิจัยของศูนย์สาธารณประโยชน์และประชาสังคม สถาบันบัณฑิตพัฒนบริหารศาสตร์ ซึ่งได้เก็บข้อมูลขึ้นต้นจากประเทศในภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ โดยผ่านการสัมภาษณ์ และการทำแบบสำรวจความคิดเห็นจากผู้เชี่ยวชาญทางด้านเพศศึกษา และครูอาจารย์ในสถาบันการศึกษารวมทั้งทิมวิจัยได้มีการออกเยี่ยมชมโรงเรียนในประเทศไทย เพื่อสัมภาษณ์ครูอาจารย์และนักเรียน รวมทั้งสังเกตและเก็บข้อมูลความไม่เท่าเทียมทางเพศที่เกิดขึ้นในโรงเรียน ซึ่งผลการวิจัยพบว่า พฤติกรรมและสถานะความไม่เท่าเทียมทางเพศยังคงมีพบได้อย่างกว้างขวาง รวมทั้งบทบาททางเพศ ค่านิยม และความคาดหวังทางเพศของสังคมที่เพศชายได้รับการเชิดชูและยอมรับมากกว่าเพศหญิงในเกือบทุกด้านในการดำรงชีวิต ดังนั้น ประเทศในภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้จำเป็นต้องมีการเปลี่ยนแปลงอย่างเร่งด่วน โดยเฉพาะนโยบายทางด้านความเท่าเทียมทางเพศในสถาบันการศึกษาบเรียนหนังสือ กิจกรรมในโรงเรียน และมีการเสริมสร้างความรู้ความเข้าใจด้านความเท่าเทียมทางเพศให้แก่ครูอาจารย์และบุคลากรทุกระดับในสถาบัน

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Introduction: Gender Inequality in ASEAN

While significant progress has been made in the fight against numerous gender-based issues over the last few decades in ASEAN member countries, there remains much more to be done to overcome the challenges facing women and girls across the region. According to ASEAN and UN Women Report (2021), access to quality education and healthcare, as well as labor force participation and employment opportunities are still not as readily available as the ones afforded to men. Worse yet are life threatening challenges such as sexual violence and discrimination which continue to deprive women and girls from living a secure and productive life and thriving in society. Early or forced marriages still exist and reproductive healthcare services severely limited, especially for those in rural areas. In addition, even when women and girls are allowed to enter into the workforce, they face workplace discrimination and unequal treatment, such as wage gaps and lack of social safety. Enforced into a gender stereotype, women and girls tend to be pooled in low-skilled industries with low wages such as in garment and textile industry. They also disproportionately represent informal sector and unpaid care and domestic work. These issues continue to impede women and girls' well-being and potential in every aspect of life.

While it is encouraging that ASEAN society as a whole appears to have a better understanding of the role of women and have a higher level of awareness regarding gender equality, and it is worth praising that ASEAN has done well in terms of establishing structural elements and policies designed to aid gender equality, but in practice, the policies and structures may not have been effectively implemented. More importantly, some of those policies are in direct conflict with many of the traditional norms, values, and cultures tightly held in Southeast Asian societies. According to ASEAN and UN Women (2021), women are still likelier to live in poverty and 24% of young women did not receive education or have employment, compared to 13% of young men. Moreover, 16% of women enter into marriage before the age of 18 and 9% of women and girls have experienced physical and sexual violence by intimate partners in 2020. In terms of female leadership, only 20% of women occupy parliamentary positions while 24% reach middle and upper management positions in the private sector. The Covid-19 pandemic has also set back many years of the achievements in gender equality as women and girls have been more affected by it. Since the pandemic, women are reportedly and disproportionately

burdened with domestic work and care. As a result, there is much more to be done if ASEAN were to achieve gender equality in all avenues.

Gender Inequality: A Systemic Problem

Having been deeply ingrained in people's way of life for thousands of years, the patriarchal value system takes precedence in how one believes and behaves. Women have been viewed, by both men and women themselves, as inferior to men and often times considered properties of men at varying degrees in different societies. Women generally do not enjoy the kind of political, social, and economic opportunities that are inherently available to men. The data from many internationally recognized databases, such as UN Women, UNDP, WEF, OECD, or ASEAN Secretariat, speak volumes for this unequal prospect. While ASEAN member countries may fare slightly better than other regions of the world in terms of economic participation and educational attainment according to the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) 2020 by World Economic Forum, huge gaps remain. Most ASEAN countries rank in the middle, except for a few countries in some categories. Even though there may be some policies and mechanisms put in place to foster a more inclusive society, the implementation has not been effective or even happened. There are many areas where ASEAN countries must improve, including a wage gap in the labor market, access to healthcare for women, and woman representation in politics.

| COUNTRY | GLOBAL RANKING | | | |
|-------------|------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| | ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE & OPPORTUNITY | EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT | HEALTH & SURVIVAL | POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT |
| Philippines | 14 th | 37 th | 41 st | 29 th |
| Lao PDR | 3 rd | 110 th | 98 th | 98 th |
| Singapore | 20 th | 84 th | 133 rd | 92 nd |
| Thailand | 22 nd | 80 th | 52 nd | 129 th |
| Indonesia | 68 th | 105 th | 79 th | 82 nd |
| Vietnam | 31 st | 93 rd | 151 st | 110 th |
| Cambodia | 25 th | 124 th | 73 rd | 119 th |
| Brunei | 28 th | 72 nd | 115 th | 148 th |
| Malaysia | 97 th | 86 th | 84 th | 117 th |
| Myanmar | 102 nd | 99 th | 57 th | 133 rd |

Figure 1: Gender Gap: ASEAN Ranking

Source: Global Gender Gap Report 2020 (WEF, 2020) via the ASEAN Post

In education, the ASEAN countries perform well in certain aspects. The data on enrollment rates show some improvements in female student enrollment rates in most countries. Especially in primary education, there is no significant gender difference in net enrollment rate. For secondary education, the rate for female enrollment even exceeds that of male in some countries (see Figures 1 and 2). The key statistics for education from UNDP also show slight improvements in mean years of schooling. In most countries, mean years of schooling for both female and male are quite close in numbers, although the numbers for male are slightly higher in most countries.

Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that the figures and numbers do not in any way translate into the quality of education, the learning environment and condition, obstacles and struggles girls must face, as well as the opportunities and other resources available to girls in schools. The number of years attending school also have no predictive power whether girls and women would succeed later in career or life in general. The type of education or the field of study chosen by students also carries great significance that has not been accounted for in the enrollment statistics. The field of study in particular matters a great deal for future prospects for girls, as for instance the female number for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields is disproportionately small compared to male. Past studies show that education for girls needs to be both sufficient and of adequate quality if they are to reach the high or similar level of achievement as boys (Aslam. 2013; Kabeer, 2009).

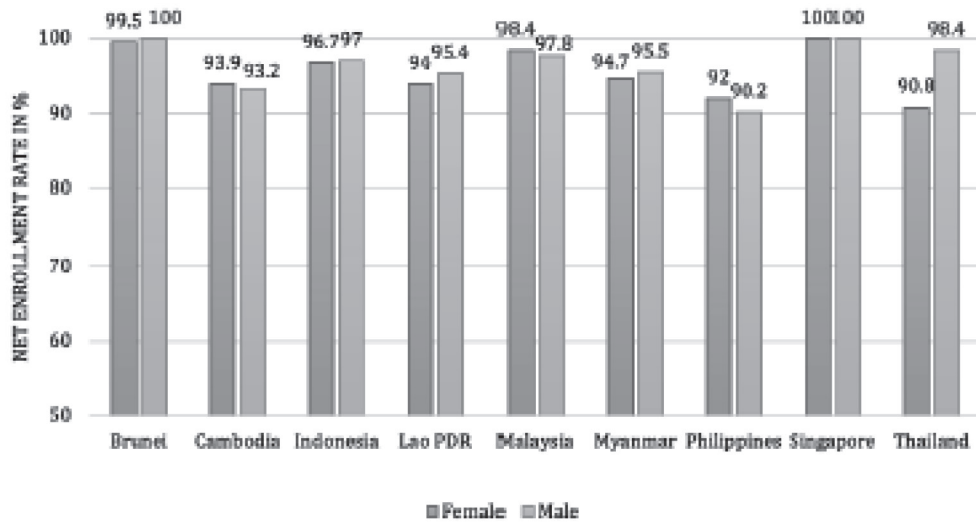


Figure 2: Net Enrollment in Primary Education by Gender, 2017

Source: ASEAN Secretariat (2019)

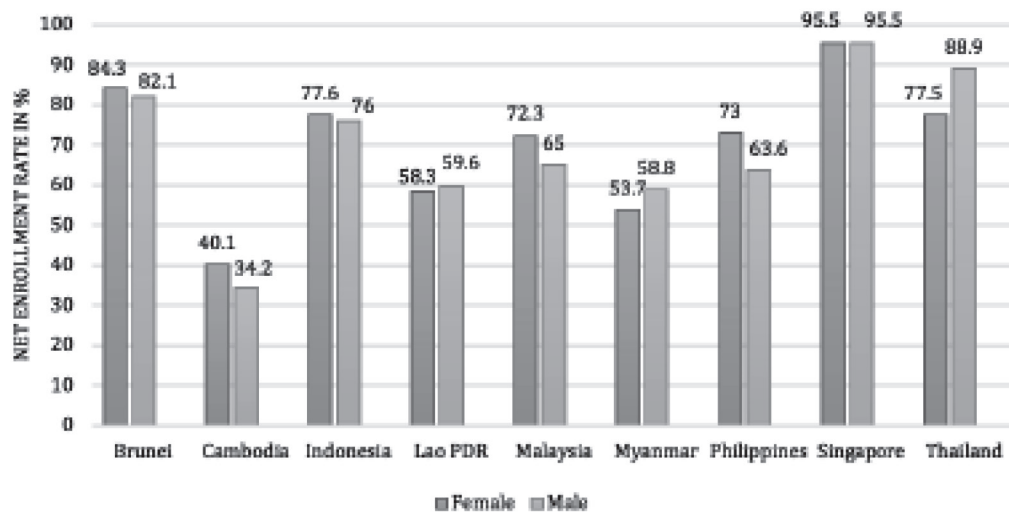


Figure 3: Net Enrollment in Secondary Education by Gender, 2017

Source: ASEAN Secretariat (2019)

The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) reported by the OECD (2021) further demonstrates that in the Southeast Asian countries, social discriminations in laws, social norms and practices are indeed systemic issues as they remain prevalent. While at the score of 35 the region may fare better than West Asia at 41 and South Asia at 48, it trails behind East Asia (22), Europe (17), Northern America (18), and Latin America (27). These systemic constraints prohibit girls and women to thrive and impede human development resulting in the losses of women's capital development and in turn economic growth. The Covid-19 pandemic has worsened the situation and the outcome for girls and women across the region since women tend to work in the most affected industries, such as retail and tourism, and thus lack social protection measures. Women and girls are also disproportionately burdened with unpaid domestic and care work due to society's perceived traditional gender roles.

ASEAN's Progress on Gender Equality

Today, women's rights in ASEAN have been significantly recognized, as seen by a number of the domestic development of gender equality related laws, policies, and organizations. All countries in the region ratified the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPfA) in 1995. The ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) was consequently established in 2010 and has made considerable progress in policy initiatives, planning, and implementations in many areas. Since its inception, ACWC aims to build a society in which men, women, and all humans can thrive, based on CEDAW. The BDPfA and Sustainable Development Goals are also used as a guideline for policy recommendations. At ACWC, the common core indicators for measuring women's advancing in political, economic, and social spheres include women's access to health services, women's access to education, female labor force participation, female employment rate, female average wage, percentage of women entrepreneurs and business owners, women in local and national leadership positions, and women representatives from women's social movement. ASEAN has seen some improvements in many of those indicators.

ASEAN countries further committed to ending gender inequality by adopting the Hanoi Declaration on the Enhancement of Welfare and Development of ASEAN

Women and Children in 2010. The ASEAN member countries also committed to the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, which vows to protect human rights and promote high quality of life and equitable access to opportunities for women and girls. Moreover, all the ASEAN countries demonstrate commitment in gender equality by aligning domestic policies with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals 2017. The policy actions that can be reflected from such effort include for instance the introduction of gender mainstreaming and gender-responsive policy and budgeting. Many countries also establish a unit or a monitoring mechanism that is responsible for the protection and development of women, which serves as a national women's machinery such as Office for Women's Development in Singapore, Department of Women's Affairs and Family Development in Thailand, or Philippine Commission on Women in the Philippines. There have been several educational institutions at the tertiary level that, in accordance with guidelines provided by the national governments and international standards, have autonomy to institute a special office or unit that issues regulations and policies that protect and empower female students.

Nevertheless, despite the efforts and initiatives enacted by governing bodies and private sector alike, gender-based discrimination still widely exists across the region. Particularly in educational sector, breaking down gender barriers and eliminating gender discriminations and stereotypes need to occur from a young age. It can help prevent the negative consequences of gender inequality that persists in our society. Schools are the most powerful avenue in achieving this goal. By providing an inclusive learning environment free of gender stereotypes, expectations, and judgments, children will grow and thrive. ASEAN countries, while appearing to be improving in gender equality in several respects, are still very much far from achieving such goal.

Research Scope and Methodology

While inequalities do extend beyond the traditional gender roles today, the scope of the study remains within the realm of inequalities that exist between male and female in the educational context. The study is a qualitative examination of differences in the treatments of boys and girls in primary and secondary schools. The primary data is gathered from the school visits in Thailand, gender expert interviews, and teachers' surveys from ASEAN member countries, all of which were conducted by the Center for Philanthropy and Civil Society (CPCS), National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA).

Results and Discussion

The survey and interview results reveal an expected set of data demonstrating deeply rooted beliefs, norms, and stereotypes towards boys and girls. While some areas have seen improvements, the majority remain unchanged. The traditional gender roles and norms foster and fuel unequal treatments and expectations that are harmful and detrimental to girls' development and opportunities in schools and future potential in life.

Gender Expert Interviews and Teachers' Surveys: ASEAN Countries

The CPCS conducted several sessions of interviews with gender experts and teachers' surveys from ASEAN countries in 2021, as part of the project titled "Elimination of Gender Stereotypes and Sexist Language in Education Materials in Primary and Secondary Levels." The interviews and surveys reveal the widespread gender-based stereotypes and practices across the region. The majority of responses show long-held beliefs that women are inferior to men, women are weak, and girls are not as capable as boys. While there have been some positive changes and improvements over the years, the results present a clear picture that there is a long way to go before we can achieve gender equality.

Unequal Treatments

Inside the school gates, boys and girls are still being treated differently, even though the awareness on the issue of gender equality has been steadily increasing. Many of the interviewees believed that male and female students should be treated differently due to several arbitrary measurements such as men and women have different attitudes and emotions; boys and girls have different abilities, physical behaviors, social interactions, and academic motivations. Although the different treatments may not be in official capacity, many study participants indicated that there are unwritten rules such as leaders must be boys. Some teachers even believe that female students should be treated differently because they have monthly menstruation. Some respondents believe that boys and girls should be treated differently based on cultural and religious norms. This proves to be a contentious point of discussion as some argue that while physical needs might be slightly different between male and female, a number of responses target female limitations based on religion and social norms.

It is clear that the survey responses reflect the societal gender norms that have been divisive for hundreds of years. While there have been some positive changes, there are so much more that needs to be done. Male students regularly receive more opportunities in every aspect of life. For instance, a focus group participant shared that male offspring inherits land and property from their fathers and have priority over girls in education because girls ultimately end up as housewives.

Unconscious Biases and Gender Stereotypes

Unconscious biases are ideas, assumptions, and beliefs of which we are unaware. They surface without our control or realization. These assumptions have been ingrained in us by our personal experiences, cultural background, and social influences. Often times, these are socially constructed stereotypes perpetuated within a culture or society. These gender assumptions and stereotypes are mostly based on naïve characterization. The interviews and surveys found that unconscious biases and gender stereotypes are extensively prevalent in society at large in the ASEAN countries and in schools, both public and private.

The survey responses demonstrate the typical stereotypes seen across the region. Men are stronger than women. Men are the breadwinners and women are housewives. The expert interviews echo similar perceptions. In terms of characters, typical statements such as men are natural leaders; women are natural nurturers; men must be strong, and women must be thin and beautiful, seem to be automatic responses. Some of them, however, are shockingly misogynistic and dangerous. Those include statements such as women are treated as slaves; women are a symbol of sex while men are a symbol of power; and women are losers. Although there are a few stereotypes about men that appear unfair and untrue such as all the guys are selfish or men who are not aggressive must be gay, the stereotypes about women are much more prevalent and almost all of them project negative connotations.

Viewed as more emotional and indecisive, in schools, boys are often given more priorities than girls in the leadership roles. Even when female students possess the same capabilities as their male counterparts, they would not be preferred as leaders. In addition, the survey responses by both teachers and school personnel include firmly held stereotypes that male students are better at science and technical fields and female

students are better at arts and languages. The ideal professions for boys and girls from the perspectives of both teachers and students demonstrate these similar stereotypes. Girls are good at arts and humanities, while boys are good at science and technology. Girls are good at routine tasks while boys are better at skilled tasks. The typical jobs for girls are receptionist, nurse, assistant, or housewife. The typical jobs for boys are police, pilot, engineer, and manager. These biases are a deeply misguided way of thinking since according to the UN, on average girls achieve a higher level of reading proficiency and the same level of math proficiency as boys in secondary school worldwide (UN Sustainable Goals Report, 2019).

The survey also shows that the norms expected of boys and girls are not different across the region. While boys are expected to be brave, outspoken, and confident, girls are expected to be submissive, sensitive, and quiet. Men are expected to lead, and women are expected to follow. Boys are expected to be dominant and role models. Girls are expected to be diligent and humble. Some of the survey responses observe that girls are measured against a higher standard than boys and thus would be more strongly condemned if they make mistakes.

Although in many instances, the intentions behind these assumptions might be harmless, they inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes and biases that hinder a person's aspirations and accomplishments. This is because unconscious biases affect the way people interact with each other and how girls are treated and taught. They can manifest in the form of directions and guidance given to girls. However, it is important to recognize that having an unconscious bias does not make one a sexist person. Everyone to a certain degree has various types of biases due to years of exposure to gender-stereotyped norms and patterns. This is why it is not an easy feat to eliminate these misconceptions and cultivate a society that values individual characters and abilities. Moreover, the survey reveals that gender stereotypes often stem from religious and cultural backgrounds. Both men and women of faith believe in these predetermined gender roles, making it nearly impossible to change since that would mean challenging their own faith.

Gender-biased Curriculum and Textbooks

Although curriculums in public schools in ASEAN countries have seen incremental changes over the years, they are still deeply ingrained with the culture that values male

dominance and female subservience. The interviews and surveys show that while all of the ASEAN countries are receptive of gender equality and how it plays an important role in all arenas of the country's prosperity, curriculum reforms, especially in terms of gender discrimination, inequality, stereotypes, and biases have been seriously lacking. Moreover, gender biases and stereotypes are prevalent in classroom practices, textbooks, and school activities. School textbooks still depict women in domestic roles or conventionally hierarchical roles, whereas men are depicted in diverse occupations such as engineers, doctors, or professors. While these are reflective of our societies, schools are entrusted with educating young minds and instilling in them the values of fairness and justice. Ironically however, school communities often times normalize the male superiority and marginalize female capability.

Previous literature found that in Southeast Asian countries, women are largely underrepresented in textbooks and even when they are, they are depicted in passive roles (Ena, 2013; Jasmani et al., 2011; Lee and Collins, 2008). The surveys and expert interviews produce the same results. The majority of responses assert that there are still gender stereotypical roles illustrated in textbooks and in the curriculum at large. There are more male representations when it comes to certain fields such as sports and sciences. Moreover, some comments in the surveys indicate that the characters still follow accepted gender roles in society; women serve men; leaders are men; and history lessons mostly depict male leaders. In school textbooks, it is common for girls and women to be illustrated as doing household chores while boys play sports or engage in outdoor activities. In many instances, the textbooks glaringly contain and promote the traditional masculine and feminine traits by portraying men as being assertive and decisive, and portraying women as being compassionate, weak, and emotional.

Gender biases and stereotypes in textbooks can have lasting impacts on children as they develop by promoting acceptance of gender inequalities. Although ASEAN countries have increased awareness in gender equality in many aspects, educational curriculums, textbooks, and school activities still portray and perpetuate female stereotypes that are unfair and sometimes downright dangerous.

Sex Education

Most countries in ASEAN have a well-designed curriculum that has been regularly updated which includes sexual and reproductive health. However, the topic is taught in terms of basic anatomy in a biology or science class, but not covering sexuality. In general, children are taught to be embarrassed to ask questions about or discuss sexuality. For many countries, the surveys and interviews found that sexuality is a taboo topic, especially for girls who, according to social norms, should not be interested in sex or have sexual experiences before marriage. Although in some of the ASEAN countries, the society appears to be more open to young women exploring their sexuality, they are still traditionally restricted, as opposed to boys being more encouraged to discuss the subject or engage in sexual relationships.

Abstinence is also reinforced when sex and relationship are discussed. Some schools and curriculums include sexual harassment and unwanted touches in their physical education, but these are mostly taught to female students as how to prevent and protect themselves. Many schools include this topic in their religious classes which emphasize abstinence and marriage rules. This is another divisive issue since the participants in the interviews mostly agreed that the society holds double standards against women. Men are socially praised for being promiscuous by having sexual prowess and experiences, while women are strongly condemned for the same behaviors.

Sex education can be a difficult topic to include in a curriculum due to certain cultural and religious beliefs. A number of the survey responses from teachers believed that the topic should not be brought up because it will unnecessarily feed into the students' curiosity and encourage them to explore the topic even more. A good number of responses also indicated that sex education should be the responsibility of the parents and the topic should be guided by religious values. Because sexuality is a sensitive issue, some believe that local religious organizations and communities should take an active role in teaching it.

Teenage pregnancy is not seen as part of public health issues. In many of the comments found in the surveys, unwanted pregnancies are the results of religious misdeeds or criminality. In some schools, regardless of how pregnancy occurs, the case will be reported to the police and concerned authorities. While there are some schools

that provide counselling and help with the welfare rehabilitation programs for pregnant teenagers, the majority of schools have no formal policy or procedure in helping the expectant teenage mothers, other than informing the parents and suspending or expelling the students. What's disturbing is that there are more cases in which the mothers are expelled from schools, while the fathers can continue on.

Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls

One of the most pressing matters regarding gender issues is gender-based violence. This encompasses all forms of sexual violence incidents, whether physical, verbal, or emotional. At schools in rural areas in some countries, girls are denied basic education because the schools do not have proper toilets for them. From the surveys, there are many facilities and areas inside the schools that are not safe for female students, including toilets, unused classrooms, storage rooms, locker rooms, gymnasiums, or even classrooms. For the victims and survivors, these horrific incidents undoubtedly create the kind of impact that lasts a lifetime. More than half of the survey responses state that gender-based harassment and bullying are still prevalent today and their school has experienced some degree of sexual harassment and child abuse cases. For some countries, a simple task such as walking to school is a high-risk activity for sexual harassment that would sadly force girls to drop out of school.

To many communities in ASEAN, it is still controversial how to define sexual harassment. There are a number of examples in which a female student would be dismissed for speaking up against a sexual act that would be deemed by teachers or school personnel as just a joke. Moreover, sexual harassments that do not inflict physical harm almost always get brushed off since there are no physical injuries on the victim's part. The expert interviews agree that the society pays little attention to this, and the cases rarely get resolved. In fact, this form of sexual harassment can cause an excruciating amount of pain for the victim's mental well-being which inadvertently leads to physical harm and suicidal tendencies. Verbal and emotional abuse in sexual nature is as toxic and detrimental as those physical ones. In addition, the social structures and conventions persistent in many of the ASEAN countries view certain behaviors as acceptable, such as hugging or touching others' children. These behaviors are brushed off as a customary form of affection expressed by adults to children. However, in many cases, these behaviors

are unwanted gestures that can leave girls and women feeling powerless and mortified. These sexual violations leave painful marks on girls and women instilling in them that their bodies are not their own and their feelings are not warranted.

Causes of Sexual Violence Against Girls in School

Normalizing inappropriate boy behaviors is a major cause for sexual violence and harassment. From the survey responses and interviews, there are many incidents in which certain behaviors are socially acceptable just because they come from boys. Verbal teasing, mocking, or boy talking about girls in demeaning and misogynistic ways are silently tolerated and thus seemingly encouraged. More often than not, these behaviors are viewed as the way boys exert their social muscles and learn how to become a man. All these purposely and completely disregard the receiving end of the teasing and mocking. Many examples and statements from our survey demonstrate that the phrase “boys will be boys” or “they’re just boys” are often used to excuse many of the disparaging behaviors toward girls. This may perpetrate a culture of rape and sexual harassment, when in fact these excuses and behaviors should not be encouraged or tolerated. It is disturbing that, as the surveys evidently found, victim shaming is such a disheartening issue facing girls and women today. The survey responses and interviews confirm that we still live in a society where it is a sole responsibility for girls to protect themselves and prevent sexual violence against them. An overwhelming number of statements point the finger to girls when a sexual harassment incident occurs. Girls wear provocative clothing. Girls should not go out alone. Girls should not be alone with boys. Girls must wear modest clothing if they want to be safe and respected. These sentiments come so naturally to even girls and women themselves. This misguided value is so deeply embedded in society that girls may blame themselves when something bad happens to them.

Victim silencing is also another serious issue. The comments from the surveys and focus groups echo this sentiment in the society. Girl and women are constantly being catcalled, sexualized, abused and harassed, verbally, emotionally, and physically, but most cases are not taken seriously or get resolved quietly often at the expense of the victim. Many study participants stated that these incidents are more common than they appear to be but very hard to detect because the victims are too afraid to speak up. A lot of survey responses surprisingly cite perpetrators being family members

and relatives, which may be a contributing factor to the victim silencing. Also, more than 80% of the survey respondents agree that being sexually harassed or abused is considered shameful and embarrassing by the victim's family. This is most likely the main reason why the victims do not come forward.

The educational and school system itself is a problem, especially when it comes to gender-based violence. The survey responses indicated that the majority of the schools still lack funding and resources for gender issues. Moreover, it is not news that girls and women are usually targeted due to the patriarchal structure and the sexualization of women in the society. From the surveys, however, many comments offer suggestions on how to prevent sexual harassment by educating or blaming girls. For instance, girls should be educated, so they don't get involved in sexual harassment or girls should wear proper and modest clothing to protect themselves. Most programs are focused on teaching girls how to behave and how to protect themselves in order to prevent sexual harassment. The examples from the survey include campaigns warning girls about sexual abuse and harassment, sex education seminars, moral and religious lessons for girls, and dress codes for girls. Although the programs are created to help girls, this kind of attitudes will never prevent sexual violence, but instead ends up perpetuating the female stereotypes and blaming the victims.

While these programs and seminars may have been created with good intentions, they are created for the wrong reason. While it is true that girls and women need to learn how to protect themselves, telling girls to wear proper clothing is not going to solve the problem. These programs apparently treat girls and women as a root cause of the problem who need fixing, when in fact it is the sexual predators and perpetrators that need fixing. Some survey respondents believe that students are not well-educated by their parents and families and so tend to get involved in sexual harassment. Some teachers, based on personal, cultural, or religious reasons, might not be comfortable in teaching or discussing sex-related topics at all. The survey results also show that teachers can be strongly judgmental, which discourages students in coming forward with the incidents and other sexual violence issues.

Lack of proper mechanisms for reporting and counselling exacerbates the problem. According to gender experts in many ASEAN countries, most educational institutions

lack an official structure and mechanism that facilitates the reporting of sexual violence. As mentioned earlier, most sexual violence cases are resolved quietly on a case-by-case basis between the victims and the perpetrators. Most schools do not have a comprehensive sexual violence prevention and management policy nor proper guidelines for students, parents, and school staff to report the incidents. A number of survey respondents believe that sexual violence against girls inside schools is much more common and there are many more sexual violence cases that go unreported. Even when schools or universities provide mental counselling for the victims, in most places the counsellors are teachers who lack training necessary for the job. They do not have the knowledge, the capacity, and the support they need to help the students.

Gender Sensitive Policy and Girl Empowerment

From the surveys and expert interviews, there are no concrete policies that focus on women empowerment and gender equality that have been effectively implemented. Some respondents contribute this to the lack of funding, but some contradict this notion stating that if the schools can allocate budget for male-dominant activities, then there must be enough money for women as well. But in most schools, the budget is usually prioritized for boy activities. Moreover, some study participants indicate that male teachers still receive higher pay than female teachers, despite having the same qualifications and job descriptions. The expert interviews also confirmed that the roles of women in both personal and professional life are not being recognized.

The majority of the responses in our surveys indicate their schools do not have official policies that focus on the encouragement and empowerment of female students. Only a handful of comments indicate that their schools have some forms of women empowerment initiatives, but they are not under official structure or capacity. Most are just verbal encouragements from teachers or counsellors. There are some policies that embrace non-discrimination principles such as programs encouraging female participation in STEM education. But all in all, the policies, if exist at all, have not been effectively implemented. In addition, the survey participants agreed that most schools in their counties only engage parents and families on a necessary basis and there is hardly anything relating to the promotion of gender equality. These are all indicative that gender equality is far from being on a policy agenda and school planning. Teachers' training is

one key element in creating gender equality and girl empowerment, as evidenced by many remarks and statements from the survey respondents and gender experts. In order for teachers to be aware of gender sensitivity and equality issues, they need the knowledge and the support from the schools. However, the teachers in most ASEAN countries do not receive gender-sensitivity training nor learn about gender equality during their time in universities. The majority of teachers admit that they do not have adequate skills and knowledge in recognizing and tackling hidden gender biases and stereotypes. In addition, there is no assessment on how effective the training is or whether the teachers succeed in learning and teaching. Especially in teaching sexuality and reproductive health, the issue is more complex than it seems to be since not all teachers have the right personalities to teach. Some may find this topic uncomfortable to teach.

The structural elements needed for gender sensitive policy and girl empowerment require commitment and support from leadership, such as the Ministry of Education and departments responsible for women's well-being. But according to the gender experts in all of the ASEAN countries, it is not easy to create change and engage the authorities on these issues. Often times, the issues of sex education and gender sensitivity issues cannot be directly discussed. It is difficult for the gender perspective to be blended in or integrated as part of the preventive measures. In some countries, there is a national curriculum teaching young kids about gender equality. It has been designed with a gender perspective and is being updated and revised according to UNESCO guidelines. However, the implementation has not taken place or has not been effective. The real concepts of gender equality, respect, relationship, and power balances are still absent.

Gender Inequality in Thailand's Educational System

Commissioned by Department of Women's Affairs and Family Development to investigate the current status of gender equality in ASEAN educational systems in 2021, the Center for Philanthropy and Civil Society (CPCS at NIDA)'s appointed research team embarked on a journey to visit a number of schools in Thailand, hoping to observe, interview, and collect data on how the Thai school environment promotes or ignores the issue of gender equality. The school visits are expected to provide empirical evidence as to how gender perspective is understood, perceived, and practiced in the educational setting, as well as how gender inequality affects the learning environment in schools

at different levels of education. Furthermore, in order to corroborate the data and information collected from the school visits, the CPCS in collaboration with NIDA Poll conducted two perception surveys on the youth perception of gender equality in the educational system in Thailand. The results from both methods – the school visits and surveys – clearly demonstrate that gender-based discrimination, biases, and stereotypes are very much the critical issues that need to be urgently dealt with if both girls and boys are to have an inclusive learning environment free of biases and prejudices.

The CPCS's research team visited a total of seven public and private schools in both primary and secondary levels. The visits proved to be an insightful experience as the team observed the school environments, peer relationships, student-teacher interactions, and engaged in meaningful conversations with students, teachers, and school administrators. The research study found that all of the schools are somewhat aware of the issue of gender inequality and what it entails. Female students are also becoming more vocal and visible. Nevertheless, a number of gender-sensitive issues still exist, many of which are so deeply ingrained in the school ecosystem they become norms and values students and teachers live by.

Change and Progress



Figure 4: More Female Students and Class Leaders

From the school visits, the study found that the awareness on gender equality has improved as the roles and expectations of women and men have become more equal, in comparison with the study conducted in 2019 by CPCS at NIDA. Girls participate and

become more opinionated in class discussions. In every school, female students are becoming more vocal as they are receiving more opportunities for various kinds of activities, both academic and extracurricular. More girls are elected or given opportunities in leadership positions. From our interviews with students, especially at the secondary level, female students are as confident and outspoken as male students, if not more. They were very vocal in what they believed in and what they aspired to be. With regards to school's student body, based on comments from both teachers and students' point of view, female candidates have comprehensive policies that take into account every group in the schools. They are more confident, decisive, and compassionate, unlike male candidates who usually focus on only one aspect of policy. Most importantly, in every school visited, girls are much more aware of the issue of gender inequality and trying to prove that girls are as capable as boys. This is indeed a promising outlook.

Gender Biases and Stereotypes

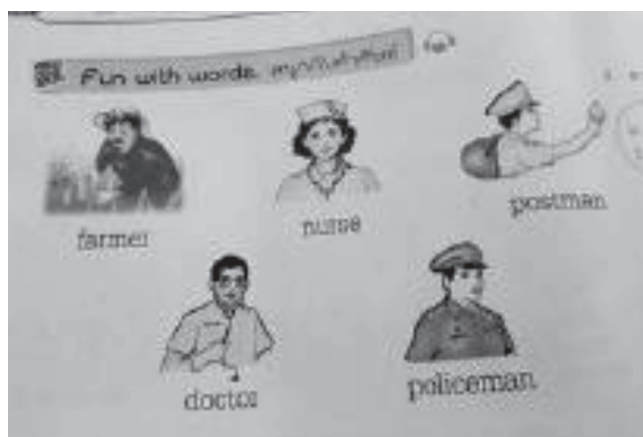


Figure 5: Gender-Biased Stereotypical Professions

Although girls today seem to be on a more equal footing with boys in schools during the visits in general, deep-rooted beliefs and gender biased stereotypes remain widespread. So often students hear such statements from their teachers as “boys have more technical abilities and potential in math and science. Even when girls may be more hard-working, boys are inherently more intelligent.” Or a teacher from one participating secondary school stated “in the student’s council, girls do most of the grunt work in policy planning and all the details. They are more responsible than boys, but boys lead the policy execution and presentation.” This kind of learning environment serves to foster and reinforce a false

assumption that can affect girls' perceptions of themselves. The visit also discovered that as girls are moving up their grade levels, according to the interviewed teachers, the level of their participation in school or class activities declines. The teachers contributed this decline to boys caring more about playing when they were young but becoming more engaging as they grew older, while girls becoming less confident and caring more about beauty and looks. This is one clear indication that the school environment might not be as supportive for girls as it is for boys.



Figure 6: Girls Traditionally Viewed as Caretakers

While it is evident from the visits that the general school atmosphere appears more accepting of girls' roles and leaderships in public spaces, gender stereotypes still abound inside the schools and school communities. Teachers and school personnel generally believe in socially constructed characterizations of gender. Exhibition boards around the schools are male- dominant, especially when it comes to academic and professional success stories. Girls are usually used as the examples or subjects of problems such as gossiping or bullying. In textbooks, girls and boys are usually portrayed in conventionally hierarchical roles. While some of these stereotypes seem harmless, some can be damaging to students' learning and development. For instance, the notion that boys are inherently smarter than girls seem to be a convention in all of the schools visited. Such belief is repeated so much so that it is viewed as a fact for some teachers. Even when girls evidently have better grades, teachers still believe boys are more intelligent. These biases are blatantly reflected through statements such as boys are smarter in general and better at calculations; even though girls have better grades, boys have better learning potential; or boys may be lazier, but smarter. The visits found that as the students move

up grade levels, girls' interest in math and science declines dramatically. This is evident that teachers' prejudice greatly impacts girls' self-confidence and academic interests.

Girls' Visibility



Figure 7: Boys Occupying Sport Fields



Figure 8: Girls Chatting During Recess

From the visits, it is virtually a consensus that the physical space is mostly occupied by male students, including gymnasiums, fields, and other open space. The teachers echo the same sentiment in that girls, as they grow older, care more about their appearances and therefore would not participate in physical activities. Because of this, many subjects and school activities are organized based on gender, which deprive girls of the chance of learning and developing. This perpetuates gender segregation and inequality between the two genders. Students often participate in activities expected of their gender, such as boys join sport and leadership activities, while girls join cultural and social activities. There are comments such as boys conquer the fields or boys and girls are not allowed to participate in the same sport at the same time. Some sports do not allow girls to participate at all. These existing practices clearly create gender biases and barriers that reinforce the arbitrarily irrational differences between boys and girls such as girls should not play sports. Moreover, boys are paid more attention and more encouraged to pursue various interests and leadership opportunities. Some teachers contended that boys should be leaders because they're stronger and louder which would make them more effective leaders. Girls are expected to be deputies and work behind the scenes. Boys are encouraged be the front man, while girls are accepted as assistants. The invisibility girls are silently forced to embrace feeds into the cycle of biases and discriminations seen rampant in schools today.

Sexual Violence Against Girls and Sex Education

The school visits shed light on the danger girls face every day at school and how important schools view the issue. While the incidents of sexual violence might not be much common these days in the visited schools, the students agreed that unwanted sexual advances and harassments are still very much part of everyday life. Boys still tease and mock girl classmates, especially their physical appearances. Even male students understand that this kind of behaviors is disrespectful and harmful to others, they still exhibit them. This signifies a deeply dysfunctional way boys learn of their place in the society. In addition, domestic sexual violence is an issue of real concern. Many interviewees indicated that domestic violence toward girls is quite common and has a great impact on girls' well-being and mental health. One example indicated that domestic violence occurred in some of the students' homes, resulting anxiety and depression on the children's part.

Teenage pregnancies are another problem for girls as teachers' attitudes demonstrate that this is mostly girls' problem. Pregnancy is seen as a burden borne solely by female students. As a result, to prevent this, according to the teachers, girls must not have premarital sex and learn to protect themselves. Nowhere in the conversations from the visits was about teaching boys how to be responsible for their actions. The problem exclusively belongs to girls. One teacher stated that what they are most worried about is female students becoming pregnant and the school would try to teach girls more intensively because if a female student makes this mistake, she will be expelled or has to pause her education, but a male student can carry on as usual without consequences. This is why girls are wanted to not be easy nor engage in a sexual relationship.

Sex education does not address the topic of sexuality and relationships, but only the biological and reproductive system. Most teachers are not comfortable discussing sexuality because of embarrassment and fear that it would unnecessarily stimulate students' curiosity. These issues most likely contribute to the sexual violence toward girls and women in schools and society at large.

Pre-service Teacher Education

One of the CPCS's school visits included a visit to teachers' educational institute which provided great insights into pre-service teacher education and how student

teachers' mindset and attitudes come about. From the interviews, the study found many issues in teacher education. First, it is interesting to note that the number of female student teachers are almost three times higher than that of male, but the institute has seen 95% of elected class presidents being male in the past five years. Despite the fact that the pool of candidates would consist of more female students, the majority of class presidents have been male. This is apparently a consequence of gender stereotypes and social conventions dictating most girls' academic choices and their opportunities for leadership positions. Moreover, when choosing fields to teach, female students overwhelmingly choose language and social sciences over technical fields such as math or physical sciences. This is yet another outcome from a female stereotype that has been cultivated in the students' minds since primary schools.

The pre-service teacher education still does not realize the importance of gender sensitivity in education. The teaching curriculum does not have an official course on the subject. The topic is occasionally incorporated in other courses, mostly depending on the teachers. The textbooks and teaching materials do not have the gender perspective and the content has not been adapted with times. The teaching pedagogies are outdated and still emphasize learning by memorization without questioning. Men are still portrayed as breadwinners, while women wear apron, cook, and clean. From the interviews, the topic of gender discrimination and inequality is still at the bottom of the agenda and most view it as a nonissue.

From the interviews, student teachers shared stories of how their own teachers inspired them to become a teacher. While a positive role model inspires them to become a teacher, a negative one inspires them to become a better teacher. This demonstrates that teachers have profound impacts on children's choices and accomplishments. Therefore, teacher education is one of the most vital elements in solving gender inequality problems in schools and in society since teachers help shape how children learn and what they can accomplish. To this end, the study also discovered that student teachers all believed that gender has nothing to do with being a good quality teacher. A good teacher must not be self-centered, but rather focus on the students and should be open-minded. They must stimulate the mind of the learners and be a good role model. These aspirations are admirable and hopeful signs for Thailand's future education.

Not only do schools provide the necessary knowledge, but schools help shape who children are and what they can achieve as a productive member of society. Gender inequality is still an unrecognized issue in the Thai education's eco-system. It is a systemic issue that needs structural and cultural changes. The school visits confirm that there is much more that needs to be done if we want our children in a school free of biases, stereotypes, and sexual violence.

Conclusion

The status of gender equality in ASEAN has been gradually improved over the years, although there are still gender gaps and women continue to experience disadvantages and discriminations in various forms, in school, workplace, and community. They face all kinds of challenges from disproportionate homelife burdens to gender-based violence. Even when they are in school, they might not be able to perform well due to gender discriminations and stereotypes. These are learning gaps that still exist today. Moreover, even though gender mainstreaming policies might be well-accepted in ASEAN countries, they seem to only be on paper, but are yet to be fully incorporated in the educational curriculum and implemented. There are still contradictory policies on gender equality such as support for equal rights and the protection of customary laws that limit women's rights or perpetuate the marginalization of women. This practice of upholding customary laws over constitutional laws in some ASEAN countries contributes to gender-based violence and gender discriminations. These contradictory gender principles and policies are present in classroom practices, which reinforce gender biases and stereotypes in children.

Schools are a second home for children. They spend the majority of their time inside the school gates and interact with many different people of all ages including their peers, teachers, school administrators, and other personnel. While girls might have had an increase in attendance and completion rates in most of the ASEAN countries, equal access to education does not always spell out educational attainment or accomplishment for girls. At times, the learning environment does not always offer the same treatment and opportunities for girls the way it does for boys. The discriminations and biases girls face every day still prevent girls from reaching their full potential. Teachers themselves for the most part still lack professional training in general and especially in the subject of gender discrimination and gender equality.

Through school, young girls and women learn and experience the socially acceptable norms and behaviors. There is no doubt that teacher-student dynamics, school curriculum, school environment, peer influences, and teachers are all key actors in cultivating gender roles and expectations and gender socialization. As a result, teachers' gendered attitudes, behaviors, and treatments of girls and boys may create positive and negative impacts on girls' self-confidence, career aspiration and future success. These messages, often unconsciously conveyed, can set a tone of how girls feel about themselves and what they can achieve. In addition, the gender biases and stereotypes plaguing the ASEAN society have remained despite the region's incredible advancements in other areas. These stereotypes, while some may seem harmless, create lifelong mentality that can be hard to shake off. Defying those stereotypes can also mean defying your family values and socially accepted behaviors. The pressure for young girls and women to conform to social conventions and to exhibit behaviors expected of them becomes their rationality in making life choices, rather than their capabilities.

Having access to sexual and reproductive healthcare must also be achieved as it is a basic human right that impacts girls and women's well-being and long-term health, in turn impacting their educational attainment and future employment prospect and other life opportunities. Family planning, as part of reproductive health, is also fiercely necessary in the development of children and youth. In many ASEAN countries however, education and conversation about puberty and sexuality are considered a taboo subject. Deeply rooted in this notion, violence against girls and women is tacitly accepted and normalized. In ASEAN countries where social structures allow for imbalanced power dynamics between men and women, men are viewed as superior and dominant, whereas women are expected to be submissive and obedient. Sexual abuse and harassment still take place every day in society and in schools. To make matters worse, legal protections are severely limited. Legal protection for women in ASEAN countries is extremely low (McKinsey Global Institute, 2018).

Eliminating gender and learning gaps in education does not mean future equal productive life for girls and women since there still exist discriminations in all of the political, economic, and social spheres. It is therefore imperative that gender equality policy needs to be more actively embraced and implemented. We all need to do our part in fostering a learning environment that is free of gender stereotypes, expectations, and judgments.

We all need to do our part in breaking down gender stereotypes and barriers that trap young girls and women everywhere so that they grow and develop into a healthy and productive member of society.

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