

Voices Unveiled: Tracking Women's Rights Across Southeast Asia and the Pacific

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TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABG	Autonomous Bougainville Government
AWAM	All Women's Action Society
AWARE	Association of Women for Action and Research
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CRT	Cassia Resettlement Team
DVRO	Domestic Violence Restraining Order
DWF	Department of Women's Affairs and Family Development
FPF	Fiji Police Force
FWCC	Fiji Women's Crisis Centre
FWRM	Fiji Women's Rights Movement
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GEWE-GBV	Permanent Parliamentary Committee on Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment and Gender-Based Violence
GHRD	Global Human Rights Defence
HDB	Housing & Development Board
ILO	International Labour Organisation
JAG	Joint Action Group
KWP	Kup Women for Peace
LAO	Local Administrative Organisation
MSDHS	Ministry of Social Development and Human Security
MSF	Ministry of Social and Family Development
MWCSP	Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection

NAPGBV	National Action Plan on Gender Based Violence
NAPVAW	National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women
NDHS	National Demographic and Health Survey
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OSCC	One Stop Crisis Centre
RPCA	Royal Police Cadet Academy
SACC	Sexual Assault Care Centre
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SGX	Singapore Exchange
SIS	Sisters in Islam
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
VAW	Violence Against Women
VAWC	Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children
WAO	Women's Aid Organisation
WCC	Women's Centre for Change
WEF	World Economic Forum
WMP	Women and Men Progressive Movement Foundation

INTRODUCTION

Voices Unveiled: Tracking Women's Rights Across Southeast Asia and the Pacific offers an in-depth examination of the evolving status of women's rights in Cambodia, Fiji, Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. This report delves into both enduring and emerging issues shaping gender equality in the region, spanning legal reforms, social movements, cultural barriers, and institutional responses.

Across these nine countries, women continue to face entrenched gender-based violence, economic marginalisation, unequal political representation, and limited access to justice. At the same time, we have witnessed grassroots momentum, stronger regional advocacy, and targeted policy efforts aimed at dismantling systemic discrimination and empowering women and girls. The role of civil society, local *leadership*, and transnational collaboration remains vital in these efforts.

Through a combination of policy analysis, data insights, and notable case studies, this report outlines key gaps, highlights recent developments, and showcases the voices of those leading the fight for gender justice. By documenting the lived realities and legislative trajectories across the region, *Voices Unveiled* seeks to support evidence-based advocacy, foster inclusive policy-making, and inspire sustained action toward achieving gender equality for all.

1. Cambodia



Cambodian women dancing in front of the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh. Photo source: © Siborey Sean via Unsplash, June 14th, 2024 at <https://unsplash.com/pt-br/fotografias/um-grupo-de-pessoas-que-estao-na-rua-s-HgknmgKjo>

1.1 Overview of Women's Rights in Cambodia

In Cambodia, gender inequality persists in almost every aspect of life, heavily rooted in a culture of unequal power relations. This results in recurrent cases of domestic violence, fewer educational opportunities, and a general limitation in women's roles in decision-making. This chapter explores recent policy and legislative developments and how they are impacting the women's rights landscape, illustrated by case studies and civil society initiatives.

Despite Cambodia having ratified core international human rights treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child,¹ women experience violence in

¹ Cambodia ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on 15 October 1992 and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on 14 November 1992.

the home, workplace and community, and patriarchal norms that limit their participation in areas such as economy, education, politics, and security. This disparity is especially concerning when it comes to vulnerable groups such as migrant workers, women with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ persons.

Statistics and surveys carried out by UN Cambodia have found that one in five women aged 15 to 49 has experienced physical violence since the age of 15. Women also remain significantly under-represented in the Cambodian public sector, both in terms of overall employment and leadership positions. Men account for 77 percent of all public sector employees and make up 85 percent of senior officials and managerial decision-makers. This under-representation is closely tied to educational disparities, as 24 percent of Cambodian women remain illiterate, compared to just 16 percent of men in the same age group. Political participation is similarly constrained, with women holding only 20 percent of the seats in the National Assembly (UN Cambodia, 2022).

These structural inequalities are also present in the health sector. The maternal mortality rate is high, with 170 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, which illustrates the poor quality of reproductive healthcare and support services in Cambodia. Moreover, traditional norms continue to shape women's autonomy, with the Cambodian Demographic and Health Survey of 2021-2022 finding that the median age at first marriage among women aged 25-49 is 21.5 years and that 19 percent of women in this age group were married before the age of 18, compared to only 6 percent of men (UN Cambodia, 2022).

Based on these alarming numbers and thanks to the voice of civil society, the government has started to make some positive progress through curricular changes in schools and national action plans. However, these measures remain uneven and are often constrained by a lack of resources and socio-cultural resistance.



1.2 Recent Policy and Legislative Developments

Cambodia has initiated several policies aimed at gender equality, including reforms to educational curricula and a National Childcare Policy. The 2007 educational reform removed the requirement for memorising the *Chbab Srey*, while a 2016 update introduced lessons on gender and women's rights and comprehensive sexuality education (UN Cambodia, 2022). There is also a government decree requiring that one in three village leaders be women (UN Women, 2025).

More recently, the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women (NAPVAW 2019–2023) was implemented. The plan builds on the previous NAPVAW and aims to uphold the safety and well-being of all women and girls in Cambodia. Its main goal is to coordinate national efforts to prevent and respond to violence through a multi-sectoral approach rooted in human rights principles. It focuses on three main priorities: (i) domestic violence/intimate partner violence; (ii) rape and sexual violence; and (iii) violence against women in vulnerable groups (UN Cambodia, 2022).

The plan is composed of four strategic areas:

01 Prevention

Improve coordination and cooperation between the government, the private sector, and civil society to promote positive behaviours of the youngsters and equitable practices.

02 Legal Protection and Multi-Sectoral Services

Strengthen the enforcement of the legal framework to promote better access to justice for women.

03 Laws and Policies

Strengthen national laws through a well-coordinated sector policy framework.

04 Monitoring and Evaluation

Establish an effective monitoring system for data collection, integrating prevalence studies, and research on violence against women.

1.3 Key Challenges and Gaps

Despite this progress, structural and systemic barriers remain. Some examples include policies that reinforce traditional gender roles (such as the National Childcare Policy), a lack of support for redistributing unpaid care work, and entrenched inequalities in labour and decision-making roles. Implementation of national plans like the NAPVAW is also under-funded and lacks effective accountability mechanisms, and other issues affecting womens' rights do not have as thorough plans in place.

The major gap areas identified are:

- **Restrictive Gender Norms:** policies and educational materials still reinforce harmful stereotypes despite curriculum reforms, limiting progress toward true gender equality.
- **Unpaid Care Work:** it is still very common in society for women to carry out unpaid domestic and care work.
- **Gender-Based Violence:** the NAPVAW lacks sufficient resources and does not address legal gaps, such as inadequate protection against sexual harassment.
- **Labour Market Inequalities:** structural barriers to entry into the labour market persist, with women over-represented in vulnerable employment and unexplained wage gaps.

1.4 Data Highlights and Trends

According to the Cambodian Demographic and Health Survey of 2021-2022, women in Cambodia continue to perform more hours of unpaid work per day compared to men. In addition, women engaged in agricultural work are much more likely (15 percent) than those working in nonagricultural occupations (2 percent) to not be paid for their work (UN Cambodia, 2022).

Women constitute 62 percent of micro-enterprise owners but face barriers in business registration and access to credit. The gender wage gap is starkest in male-dominated industries like construction (29 percent) and trade (25 percent) (UN Cambodia, 2022).

Female representation in senior government roles remains limited, and only one of Cambodia's 25 provincial governors is a woman (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2015).

A 2020 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) analysis found that discrimination is the principal contributor to the gender wage gap, outweighing education or differences in professional experience. During COVID-19, women reported higher job losses and increased care burdens (UNDP, 2021).

In 2020, women held 21 percent of National Assembly seats and 16 percent of Senate seats. This representation declined after the 2023 elections, falling to 13 per cent in parliament. Women now account for only Ten percent of Ministers and 15 percent of Secretaries or Under Secretaries of State, despite making up 42 percent of the civil service (UN Women, 2025).

1.5 Civil Society and Grassroots Initiatives

Civil society organisations play a key role in advancing gender equality in Cambodia due to their close connection to local realities and ability to fill the gaps left by the state. Human rights groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as CARE Cambodia, and the Cambodian Women's Crisis Centre, have conducted community education, offered direct services to survivors of violence, and supported women's political and economic empowerment. Activists take action sometimes at great personal risk. One particularly powerful example of women's leadership and advocacy is the Boeung Kak Lake Activists, where women community leaders took the forefront in a protest to mark the boundaries of demolished homes in the community, resulting in their imprisonment (Human Rights Watch, 2012).

However, these actors face increasing threats to their operations due to shrinking democratic space and limited access to funding (European Parliament, 2024). Recent analysis found that shrinking space for civil society in Cambodia “has already had negative impacts on development outcomes and is very likely to have negative outcomes for a number of the human development sustainable development goals”, and the UN has urged development partners to boost civil society efforts through funding and formal recognition of their role in policy development and monitoring (UN Cambodia, 2022).



Climate activists holding a banner. Photo source: © Vincent M.A. Janssen via Pexels, April 10th, 2025 at <https://www.pexels.com/pt-br/foto/pessoas-segurando-estandarte-2561628/>

1.6 Notable Case Studies

Some cases exemplify the threats to women's rights in daily life. In the Ratanakiri Indigenous region, recent changes in land tenure have disrupted traditional systems of inheritance and land use. As land becomes increasingly commodified and integrated into market economies, customary laws that were once centred around women's key ownership roles are being set aside. The shift from communal land use to private ownership, coupled with the spread of commercial farming and unsustainable agricultural practices, has weakened Indigenous women's traditional authority over the land. These developments risk further undermining their economic independence and social status (Food and Agriculture Organisations of the UN, 2019).

Similarly, in the garment sector, women working under fixed-duration contracts face exploitative conditions and lack maternity protections. In addition to extremely low wages, the workday is generally set at eight hours a day, six days a week, with possible overtime limited to two hours per day. The situation worsened when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and many female workers were temporarily suspended or lost their jobs entirely (Global Citizen, 2023). Furthermore, the United States' sweeping tariffs are especially affecting this sector, as it represents one of the few reliable sources of income to some of the country's poorest citizens. The situation highlights the need to continue advocating for safer working conditions and fair wages (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2025).

\$200

In 2023, the minimum wage compensation for garment workers was the equivalent of \$200 per month, with workers taking home on average between \$260 to \$280 in monthly earnings (Global Citizen, 2023).

2. Fiji



Photo of a woman. Photo source: © Chinh Le Duc via Unsplash, July 23rd, 2018 at <https://unsplash.com/photos/selective-focus-photo-of-woman-bZhLWaf5q7I>

2.1 Overview of Women's Rights in Fiji

In Fiji, gender inequality remains a significant concern, with societal attitudes often reflecting deeply embedded patriarchal values that position women as subordinate to men. These traditional beliefs continue to shape public perception and contribute to systemic discrimination, particularly in areas of personal safety, domestic responsibilities, and legal protection (Vaughton, 2023). The consequences of these inequalities are stark: data from 2018 revealed that 23.2 percent of women aged 15 to 49 experienced physical or sexual violence at the hands of a current or former intimate partner within the span of a year (UN Women, n.d.).

Moreover, women and girls over the age of 15 dedicate approximately 13.9 percent of their time to unpaid domestic and caregiving duties, a stark contrast to the 4.9 percent spent by their male counterparts (UN Women, n.d.). While Fijian law criminalises all forms of rape, including spousal rape, and prescribes life imprisonment as the maximum penalty, GBV, including domestic abuse, incest, and sexual harassment, remains widespread (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Between January and August 2023, the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre documented 599 cases of domestic violence - an increase from the previous year - highlighting ongoing issues despite the availability of government-supported hotlines aimed at facilitating the reporting of abuse (U.S. Department of State, 2024). These figures

underscore the urgent need for continued legal reform, public education, and support services to ensure the protection and empowerment of women across the country.

2.2 Key Challenges and Gaps

Political Rights of Women in Fiji

In Fiji, there are no legal barriers preventing women or members of marginalised groups from participating in the political process, and both groups do take part in elections and political activities (U.S. Department of State, 2024). However, societal and cultural attitudes regarding gender roles continue to restrict the political participation of many women, particularly Indigenous women (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Women who had changed their names after marriage were impacted by legislation that required individuals to use the name on their birth certificate when registering to vote or applying for official identification documents (Freedom House, 2024). This law, passed in 2021, was seen as discriminatory, particularly towards married women, as it restricted their ability to register under their preferred name. In response to these concerns, Parliament repealed the law in July 2023, eliminating the requirement that voters and candidates register using their name on their birth certificates (Freedom House, 2024). This change improved the political environment for women and marked another step in the right direction for improving legal protection for women's political rights in Fiji (Freedom House, 2024).

This change improved the political environment for women and raised the legal protection score for women's political rights from two to three (Freedom House, 2024).

Despite these legal adjustments, women, particularly those from Indigenous and Indo-Fijian communities, remain under-represented in both political leadership and decision-making roles. Indo-Fijians, who make up about 36 percent of the population, are notably under-represented in government and the military, and women from both Indigenous and Indo-Fijian backgrounds continue to face barriers in entering the political sphere (U.S. Department of State, 2024). The 2022 parliamentary elections reflected this disparity, with only six women elected out of 55 members of Parliament (Freedom House, 2024). While there are no formal restrictions preventing women or ethnic minorities from participating in politics, the lack of significant representation and cultural limitations on women's roles in society pose ongoing challenges to achieving gender equality in Fiji's political arena.

Women's Employment Rights in Fiji

In Fiji, women continue to face significant challenges in the workforce, including unequal treatment and a persistent gender pay gap (Freedom House, 2024). On average, women earn approximately 30,000 Fijian dollars less annually than men, a disparity that severely limits their financial autonomy (Vaughton, 2023). This income inequality is closely linked to broader patterns of discrimination in employment and is further exacerbated by the limited control many women have over household finances and decision-making (U.S. Department of State, 2024). As a result, women often find themselves in more vulnerable social and economic positions.

Although national legislation prohibits employment discrimination based on gender, marital status, or family circumstances, and mandates equal pay for work of equal value, women are still generally paid less than their male counterparts for similar roles (U.S. Department of State, 2024). The law allows women to work in most sectors, except in underground roles, and includes provisions to address workplace sexual harassment through legal complaints. The economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened these disparities, leading to a marked rise in poverty among women across the country (Vaughton, 2023).

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence continues to be a critical issue in Fiji, with offenders frequently receiving minimal penalties following conviction. The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre reported a noticeable increase in domestic violence incidents during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown imposed by the government to curb the virus's spread (Freedom House, 2024).

Nevertheless, serious issues persist in the areas of rape, spousal abuse, incest, and sexual harassment (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Domestic violence is specifically identified as a criminal offence under the law (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Although police are mandated to pursue all domestic violence allegations regardless of whether the victim later retracts the complaint - a practice known as the "no-drop" policy - women's advocacy groups have observed inconsistent enforcement (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Additionally, reports have pointed to lenient law enforcement and judicial practices, with some domestic violence and incest cases either dismissed or resulting in light sentencing (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Cultural and religious reconciliation customs in both Indigenous and Indo-Fijian communities have sometimes been used to reduce or avoid penalties. In certain instances, authorities have released offenders without a formal conviction, contingent on their future good behaviour (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

NGOs such as the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre and Pacific Women have played an active role in supporting survivors of GBV. Their efforts include providing education, counselling, and social services, as well as advocating for stronger legal protections for women and girls (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Sexual harassment is also legally prohibited in Fiji. The government enforces these laws through provisions against “indecent assaults on females”, aimed at protecting women's dignity (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Despite these laws, sexual harassment remains a widespread concern. While women legally possess full inheritance and property rights, they are often excluded from decisions involving the use or leasing of Indigenous communal land, which comprises more than 80 percent of the country's territory (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Although women are entitled to a share of lease proceeds from such land, this entitlement is rarely honoured (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

In principle, women have equal rights to men under family and judicial law. However, practical barriers remain, especially in securing protection orders in domestic violence cases and ensuring police compliance in enforcing them (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Reproductive Rights

There were no documented cases of coerced abortion; however, concerns were raised regarding the treatment of individuals with disabilities, specifically in cases where they were denied the opportunity to give informed consent for medical procedures related to reproductive health, including sterilisation (U.S. Department of State, 2024). The government ensured access to family planning services, with women able to obtain contraceptives free of charge at public healthcare facilities. Contraceptives were also available through private medical practitioners, typically at minimal cost (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Despite this accessibility, some NGOs reported that women occasionally faced cultural or familial pressure discouraging the use of contraceptives (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Sexual and reproductive health services were provided by the government, including emergency contraception for survivors of sexual violence. However, there was no available information regarding access to post-exposure prophylaxis for these individuals (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

LGBTQIA+ Rights

Consensual same-sex sexual relations between adults are not criminalised under Fijian law (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Despite this legal protection, NGOs have reported that the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer and intersex members frequently experience violence. Pervasive societal stigma has led to a deep mistrust of law enforcement, discouraging many victims from reporting incidents due to fears of additional abuse or harassment by authorities (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Transgender women, in particular, have been identified as especially vulnerable, continuing to face alarmingly high levels of sexual violence and GBV, including regular harassment and targeting by police officers (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

The Fijian constitution explicitly prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Legislation also outlaws discrimination in employment based on sexual orientation (U.S. Department of State, 2024). However, despite these legal safeguards, NGOs have documented ongoing reports of discriminatory practices affecting LGBTQIA+ individuals across various sectors, including employment, housing, healthcare, and public services (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

A study conducted by the NGO Diverse Voices and Action for Equality highlighted the economic challenges faced by the LGBTQIA+ community, revealing that a significant proportion of lesbian and bisexual women, as well as transgender individuals, live in poverty. The research found that approximately 62 percent of respondents were either unemployed or engaged in insecure, low-paying casual labour (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

2.3 Recent Policy & Legislative Developments

Women's Rights to a Clean and Healthy Environment

In a briefing paper released on April 25th, 2023 the International Commission of Jurists highlights that, although the right to a clean and healthy environment is enshrined in Fiji's 2013 Constitution, its realisation requires more than legal recognition. Effective implementation demands a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, supported by adequate technical and financial resources. The paper offers targeted recommendations to strengthen Fiji's environmental legal and policy frameworks to better protect women's rights in this area (International Commission of Jurists, 2023).

Fijian women's constitutional right to a clean and healthy environment aligns with international standards, notably the UN General Assembly's adoption of Resolution A/76/L.75, which affirms this right as a fundamental human right. Several factors drive environmental change in Fiji, including population growth, urbanisation, economic development, globalisation, geographic, and locational characteristics, technological

advancements, traditional cultural values, and climate change (International Commission of Jurists, 2023).

However, gender inequality continues to hinder women's ability to fully exercise their human rights and build resilience in the face of environmental and climate-related crises. Climate change has evolved into a multi-dimensional issue, it is not only an environmental and political issue but also a deeply social challenge that exacerbates existing gender disparities. It disproportionately affects women, girls, and marginalised communities, which already face systemic barriers and limited control over natural resources. To fulfil the right to a clean and healthy environment, the Fijian government must enact legislation that defines both procedural and substantive components, ensuring effective implementation. This briefing assesses Fiji's alignment with international best practices, particularly regarding gender integration in environmental laws and policy frameworks (International Commission of Jurists, 2023).

Fiji National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls 2023-2028

In June 2023, Fiji became the first Pacific Island country - and the second globally after Australia - to launch a national, inclusive, cost, and evidence-based action plan focused on preventing violence against all women and girls. The National Action to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls 2023–2028 reflects a whole-of-government and whole-of-population approach to tackling this issue (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2025).

The Fijian government has allocated Fijian one million dollars for the 2023–2024 fiscal year, with a further Fijian 6 million dollars contributed by the Government of Australia. This plan is the first of two five-year strategies aimed at building long-term national prevention infrastructure. The Development of the National Action to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls 2023–2028 involved consultations in thirteen sectors across Fiji, engaging over 2,100 people - including women, men, and youth - from all four divisions. At the launch, five priority areas - education, sports, and recreation, the informal sector, and faith and traditional institutions - were committed to specific actions within the first 18 months of implementation. The Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection (MWCSP) will lead implementation by establishing a national Coordination and Implementation Unit, launching a communications strategy to promote gender equality, and conducting a Community Attitudes Survey to measure public perceptions (UN Women, 2023).

The plan was developed with support from a Secretariat composed of MWCSP, the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, and UN Women, and guided by a Technical Working Group representing civil society and government agencies. UN Women's support is part of the

Pacific Partnership to End Violence Against Women and Girls, funded by the European Union and the Governments of Australia, New Zealand, and UN Women (UN Women, 2023).

2.4 Recent Notable Case Study

The Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM) and the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC) have both strongly criticised the Fiji Police Force (FPF) for failing to adequately protect women facing domestic violence. FWRM Executive Director Nalini Singh emphasised that women often wait years - an average of 868 days - before seeking help, only to encounter unsafe environments at police stations, sexual harassment from officers, and poor referral to critical support services (Chand, 2025; Fiji Women's Rights Movement, 2025). Singh labelled the police's approach as a "head in the sand" attitude that continues to cost lives, highlighting the urgent need for accountability and improved service delivery as outlined in the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls.

In a related development, FWCC coordinator Shamima Ali met with Police Commissioner Rusiate Tudravu to address these systemic issues directly. During the meeting, Ali expressed concerns about the mistreatment of women reporting crimes, police inaction on Domestic Violence Restraining Order (DVRO) breaches, internal misconduct, and declining service standards. She also raised the need for better officer training and respect for NGOs' work. Commissioner Tudravu acknowledged the longstanding collaboration between FPF and FWCC and committed to further training efforts to strengthen police responses to GBV (Devi, 2025).

3. Indonesia



Village assessment in commemoration of 17 August independence of Indonesia. Photo source: © Firman Fatthul via Unsplash, August 17th, 2022 at <https://unsplash.com/photos/a-couple-of-women-in-traditional-clothing-wP1fxIi4OZI>

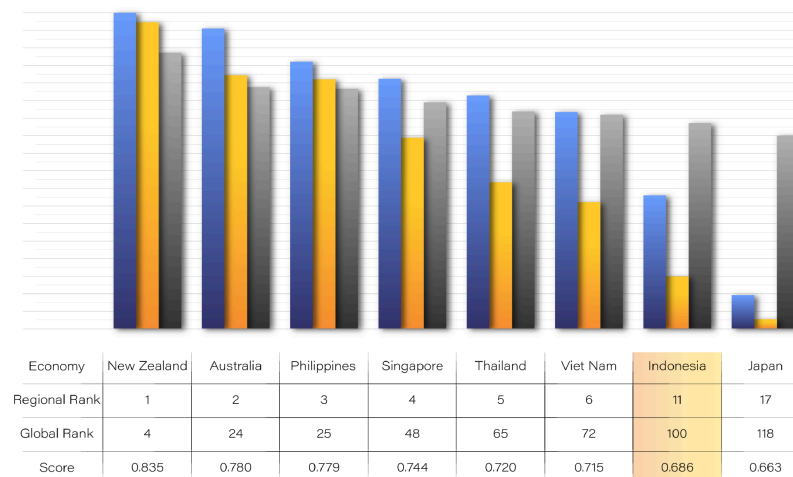
3.1 Overview of Women's Rights in Indonesia

Indonesia presents a complex and evolving landscape for women's rights, marked by both progress and persistent challenges. On one hand, the country has seen notable advancements, such as increasing female political representation—women now hold 22 percent of parliamentary seats, up from 18 percent in 2019 (UN Women, 2025).

Indonesia is ranked 100th by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in its 2024 gender performance, declining from its previous 87th position. The WEF's Global Gender Gap Index highlights Indonesia's strong performance in closing gender gaps in educational attainment and health and survival, while its progress in women's political empowerment remains moderate. However, the country significantly lags in women's economic participation, representing a critical area for policy improvement. Notably, female labour force participation has stagnated at just over 50 percent for decades, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to unlock women's economic potential.

Furthermore, the cultural diversity in Indonesia creates various local wisdoms as guidelines for society to behave, meaning that the community adheres to norms which have a

combination of local wisdom and religious values (Pratama, et. al, 2024). In different religions, there is a common belief that human equality and dignity should be respected. Nevertheless, traditional societies in rural areas tend to use cultural and religious norms as justification to limit the ability of women to work outside their homes and have a choice in the type of work (Larasati, 2021). This illustrates the complex sociological circumstances which the government needs to address, for example, by enacting policies to improve gender equality across the country.



Source: World Economic Forum, ‘The Global Gender Gap Report 2024’.

3.2 Key Challenges

01 Legal Framework and Assistance

In terms of the legal framework, Indonesia has shown its commitment to supporting the protection of women and equal treatment in both international and national spheres. Under Article 27(1) of its Constitution, Indonesia guarantees gender equality in which every citizen is equal before the law and the government without any exemption. Indonesia’s recognition of such equal rights is reflected in its participation in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Committee, which was later ratified through Law No. 7 of 1984 and translated in Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2000 on Gender Mainstreaming. Aside from incorporating acts of sexual violence under the Criminal Code, Indonesia has also enacted specific laws and regulations addressing women’s rights issues, namely Law No. 12 of 2022 on Sexual Violence Crime, Law No. 23 of 2004 on the Elimination of Domestic Violence, and Law No. 35 of 2014 on Child Protection.

In Indonesia, female victims of abuse have the option to report their case either to the Women’s and Children’s Service Unit (*Unit Pelaksana Teknis Daerah Perlindungan*

Perempuan dan Anak or UPTD PPA) at the local district or city police office. However, many victims face confusion regarding reporting procedures and the *visum et repertum* process – an official medical examination report issued by a doctor upon request from law enforcement (Nurtjahyo, 2022). This challenge is particularly pronounced among women with limited legal awareness. Additionally, filing a report without legal assistance may leave victims vulnerable to intimidation by the perpetrator or their family.

Alternatively, victims can first seek assistance from specialised service providers, such as NGOs offering legal advocacy and support for women, including LBH, APIK, or Rifka Annisa. With guidance from these institutions, the victim can then formally report the case to the police, complete the *visum et repertum* process, and file the necessary documents at the police station (Asosiasi LBH APIK, 2025; Rifka Annisa Women’s Crisis Centre, 2025). In addition, these organisations facilitate access to psychological counselling through their appointed professionals, ensuring comprehensive support for the victims.

02 (Online) Gender-Based Violence

Indonesia’s struggle against Gender-Based Violence (GBV) reveals a disturbing paradox. There is an alarming surge in cyber GBV - a 305 percent increase in reported cyber GBV cases between 2017 and 2020, with 510 incidents documented in 2020 alone (Komnas Perempuan, 2021). This epidemic of digital violence encompasses a spectrum of crimes, including non-consensual pornography, sexual blackmail, and online harassment, exposing fundamental flaws in Indonesia’s legal and social infrastructure in protecting women in digital spaces.

The legal landscape surrounding cyber GBV remains fraught with contradictions. While the landmark 2022 Sexual Violence Crime Law represents a significant step forward, its implementation has been hampered by systemic inertia. Law enforcement agencies continue to rely on outdated frameworks such as Law No. 44 of 2008 on Pornography and Law No. 19 of 2016 on Electronic Information and Transactions. These legal frameworks were never designed to address cyber GBV, even if the Pornography Law has provisions condemning the acts of cyber sexual violence. These archaic statutes are often used to compound victim trauma by creating scenarios where survivors of revenge porn or sextortion find themselves facing prosecution for “producing” intimate content, while their tormentors evade meaningful accountability (Maramis et al., 2023).

Institutional barriers further exacerbate the crisis. Indonesian police officers lack specialised training in handling digital evidence or employing trauma-informed investigative techniques (Maramis et al., 2023). This capacity gap is particularly acute in rural regions, where limited technological infrastructure and gender biases within law enforcement create virtual impunity for perpetrators.

03 Child Marriage

Indonesia's struggle to curb child marriage highlights the tension between progressive legal reforms and deeply rooted socio-religious norms. Law No. 16 of 2019 on the revision of Marriage Law raised the minimum age for marriage for girls from 16 to 19, aligning it with the age for boys and addressing the criticisms of gender discrimination. However, this reform has faced significant challenges in implementation due to exemptions granted by religious courts, cultural acceptance of early marriage, and economic pressures. The conservative community's strict interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence, which lacks explicit age restrictions but emphasises puberty as a marker of readiness, often clashes with national laws, creating loopholes that perpetuate child marriages (Zulaiha & Mutaqin, 2021).

A critical issue is the widespread use of marriage “dispensations”, which allow underage unions if parents or guardians petition the courts. These dispensations are frequently justified under vague “urgent reasons”, such as preventing premarital sex or alleviating family financial burdens (Heriawanto, 2019). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, economic hardship led to a surge in dispensations, with 24,000 child marriages recorded in 2020 alone (Zulaiha, 2017). The high approval for such proposals reflects the judges' priority on socio-religious norms over the long-term harms of child marriage.

04 Workplace Discrimination

Indonesia's labour market continues to grapple with deeply entrenched gender discrimination, despite progressive policies aimed at fostering workplace equality. While women constitute nearly half of Indonesia's population, they represent only 38 percent of the formal workforce, with even fewer ascending to leadership roles (Perempuan Indonesia, 2018; Ralie, 2019). This disparity stems from a complicated combination of cultural norms, institutional biases, and legal shortcomings that systematically disadvantage women in employment opportunities, compensation, and career advancement.

The roots of workplace discrimination extend deep into Indonesian society, where traditional gender roles often dictate women's participation in the labour force. Structural functionalist theory explains how these norms manifest in corporate hierarchies –men dominate managerial positions, while women are funnelled into lower-paying, less secure roles (Soleman, 2020). This division is reinforced by the pervasive belief that women are primarily carers, leading to discriminatory hiring practices.

Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati disclosed that Indonesian women earn 23 percent less than their male counterparts for equivalent work, a disparity exacerbated in

male-dominated sectors like manufacturing and technology (Sembiring, 2019). The Asian Development Bank's findings reveal even wider gaps in urban areas, where women's wages lag 30 percent behind men's (Radu, 2019). These inequities are institutionalised through opaque promotion systems and bonus structures that favour male employees, while women face "glass ceiling" effects when seeking leadership roles.

3.3 Case Studies: Sexual Violence in Higher Education Institutions

The dismissal of a professor from Universitas Gadjah Mada's Faculty of Pharmacy in January 2025 marked a significant milestone in Indonesia's response to campus sexual violence. As confirmed by the National Police's official portal, the tenured academic was terminated after a two-year internal investigation revealed systematic abuse involving several female students, including inappropriate touching during lab sessions and coercive sexual demands masked as "mentorship" (Indonesian National Police, 2025). What began as whispered complaints only reached formal proceedings after survivors risked retaliation by petitioning the university's ethics board with documented evidence—a common hurdle which prevents most Indonesian campus assault cases from ever reaching disciplinary stages (Kompas, 2025).

This mirrors patterns seen at Universitas Padjadjaran (Unpad), where a medical student expelled for assaulting classmates had previously received only "verbal warnings" for similar offences (Antara News, 2025). Both institutions employed what is commonly referred to as the "three Ds"—**delay** investigations, **downplay** severity, and **divert** blame to victims' "provocative behaviour".

Structural barriers worsen the trauma for survivors. Indonesia's 2022 Sexual Violence Crime Law lacks provisions mandating universities to establish independent reporting channels (despite the sexual violence cases consistently emerging in such an environment), leaving victims dependent on ad-hoc faculty committees. The National Police's involvement in the UGM case emerged only after public outcry, highlighting how rarely campus assaults reach criminal courts despite meeting legal definitions of rape or coercion.

Yet these cases also reveal shifting norms. Universitas Gadjah Mada and Unpad's unprecedented public naming of the expelled individuals signals growing institutional fear of social media exposure. Reforms are progressing: the University of Indonesia has strengthened its anti-sexual violence measures, and the newly selected Task Force members for the 2024-2026 term have solemnised their appointments by signing an integrity declaration (Kompas, 2025), while Universitas Gadjah Mada and Unpad promised to evaluate their internal measures addressing sexual violence in a campus environment.

4. Malaysia



Hijab Women Sitting on White Chairs." Photo source: © Nataresya/Pexels, August 5th, 2022 at <https://www.pexels.com/photo/hijab-women-sitting-on-white-chairs-13588644/>

4.1 A Malaysian Overview of Women's Rights

On paper, gender equality is nominally secured in Malaysia's Constitution; Article 8(2) was amended in 2001 to explicitly prohibit gender-based discrimination, and Malaysia is a State party to the CEDAW. But those formal commitments are constantly strained by the reality of legal pluralism. Malaysia's dual legal system - civil and Islamic Syariah - has produced overlapping and at times competing jurisdictions, particularly in matters of personal status: marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance (Steiner, 2019). The constitutional guarantee of equality does not clearly override religious provisions. Courts, legislators, and policymakers have all, at various junctures, deferred to conservative interpretations of Islamic law. In doing so, they have reinforced the gendered hierarchies that these laws can entrench. This deference is not a passive artefact; it's a live instrument of policy-making that limits the reach of reform even when intent exists (Steiner, 2019).

In parallel, some markers of progress are undeniable. Women in Malaysia today outpace men in tertiary education, accounting for 56.7 percent of university enrolment and benefiting from near-equal access to healthcare and education (Abdul Hamid & Muzafar, 2024). These gains have led to near parity in youth literacy and a life expectancy for women of approximately 77 years, just above that of men at 72. Yet, this advancement in health and education has not translated into socio-economic symmetry. However, according to World

Bank estimates, Malaysian women’s labour force participation rate was only 51.8 percent in 2023, compared to 78.3 percent for men (Abdul Hamid & Muzafar, 2024).

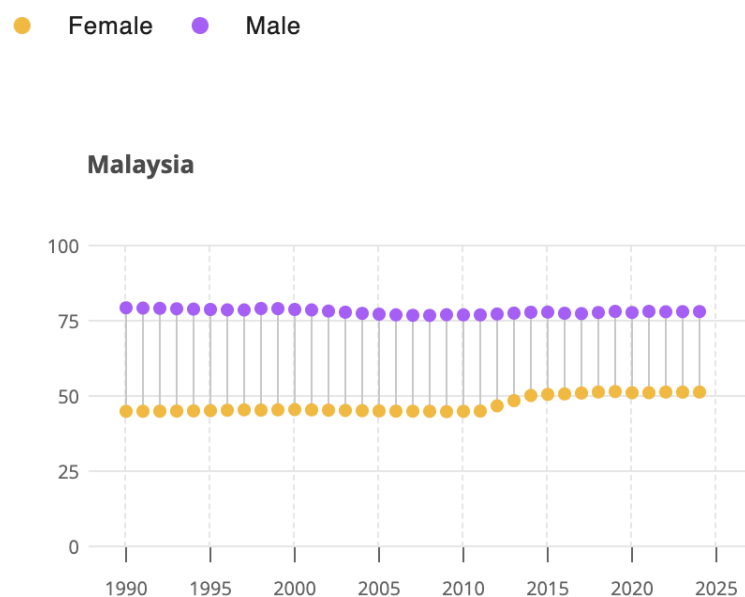


Figure 1. Labour force participation rate in Malaysia by gender, 1990–2025 (age 15 and older). Source: Modelled ILO estimates via World Bank.

Additionally, women remain under-represented in decision-making: as of early 2022, they held just 14.9 percent of parliamentary seats in the Dewan Rakyat (lower house) and 11.4 percent in the Senate (Ahmad Zakuan, 2023), and all 13 state legislatures similarly have under 12 percent women members. Finally, the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index 2022 ranked Malaysia 103rd of 146 countries (score 0.681), with particularly poor scores in political empowerment (Countryeconomy, 2024).

The progress for Malaysian women has been telling. In recent years, Malaysia has launched “gender mainstreaming” efforts and begun floating legislative proposals aimed at strengthening protections for women (Nik Saleh et al., 2020), and while access to education, healthcare, and formal rights has widened meaningfully over the past few decades, the path forward is neither linear nor assured. What follows is an examination of the pressures that uphold gender inequality, the legal and policy reforms that attempt to chip away at that foundation, the civil society efforts to reframe the public narrative, and the lived experiences that make these systemic tensions visible.

4.2 Legal Architecture and Gendered Exclusions

Constitutional Loopholes & Child Marriages

Article 8(2) of the Federal Constitution prohibits sex discrimination by the State, but it still explicitly exempts Syariah personal law, creating a *de jure* loophole that permits gender discriminatory practices. For instance, marital rape is not yet criminalised. According to section 375 of the Penal Code, husbands are exempted from rape prosecution unless the assault causes physical harm (Arrow, 2022). As a result, Malaysian women continue to be left unprotected in a very intimate aspect of their lives. Another issue is child marriage. Civil law sets the minimum age for marriage at eighteen (or sixteen for non-Muslims with state-level approval), but Syariah law permits girls to marry at sixteen only in exceptional cases and with consent from the court. In fact, in Malaysia, 92 percent of child marriages involve Muslim girls (Ova, 2022). An issue that is most relevant in rural areas. Despite the Malaysian government's efforts, minority opposition from conservative religious state bodies has continuously stalled the implementation of a nationwide ban on child marriages.

Violence Without Remedy

Furthermore, due to the lack of enforcement, the Domestic Violence Act of 1994 and other similar provisions are ineffective. Often, domestic abuse survivors report inconsistencies and difficulties obtaining timely protection from law enforcement. To add on, the lack of gender sensitivity resulting from inherent cultural stigmas means that many women do not feel comfortable reporting acts of domestic and sexual violence. These weaknesses in institutions became evident during the COVID-19 lockdowns. One study reports a 3.4 times increase in domestic violence cases at this time (Le et al., 2024). Shelters and one-stop crisis centres faced capacity issues, especially in rural areas and the states of Sabah and Sarawak, as a result of this spike in violence. The government's data later showed police reports of domestic violence jumped 42 percent from 5,260 cases in 2020 to 7,468 in 2021 amid pressures from the pandemic (Ova, 2024).

Work, Care, and Political Absence

Women in the Malaysian workforce still face discrimination in the workplace. For instance, although the Employment Act was amended in 2022 to extend maternity leave to 98 days, the structure of the workplace still lacks flexibility, as women still shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid care work. On average, Malaysian women spend 4.5 hours per day on unpaid work compared to 1.4 hours for men (Abdul Hamid & Muzafar, 2024). This imbalance partly explains the persistence of low female labour participation, as women face a “double-burden” and are forced to take career breaks. In the public sector, women in politics specifically cite a male-dominated culture. As a result, they often lack mentors who could help them rise in rank. While women are entitled to civic rights on paper, they hold only one out of ten leadership positions across the public and private sectors on average (Ahmad Zakuan, 2023).

4.3 Recent Policy and Legislative Developments

While gender-based issues are still prevalent in Malaysia, the government has made continuous efforts to strengthen its commitments to women’s rights. Firstly, in July 2021, the government adopted a National Action Plan on Gender Based Violence (NAPGBV). This Plan, welcomed by experts at CEDAW, is seen as a positive development to strengthen Malaysia’s prevention, response and support measures related to domestic violence, sexual assaults and other issues related to toGBV (OHCHR, 2024). The NAPGBV calls for improved multi-agency coordination and more gender-sensitised training for law enforcement, including judicial bodies, and aims to expand survivor support services (hotlines, crisis centres, legal aid).

Similarly, Malaysia’s participation in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process in 2018 and 2023 has led to numerous accepted recommendations on women’s rights (Arrow, 2022). For example, Malaysia lifted its reservations to CEDAW Article 16(2) (related to child marriage) in 2018, and in 2022, there were discussions on draughting a Sexual Harassment Bill (now realised) and a Gender Equality Bill (still pending).

Furthermore, in 2020, the National Strategic Plan to End Child Marriage was launched in some federal states, which administratively raised the minimum age of marriage to eighteen for Muslims (Norton-Staal & Lee, 2020). Among them were the States of Selangor, Penang, and Sabah. Statistics show an improvement in the child marriage trend. The number of child marriages recorded dropped by almost 39 percent from 1,856 in 2018 to 1,124 in 2020 (Ova, 2022). Still, because the federal law has not been amended (marriage laws fall under state jurisdiction for Muslims), child marriage has not been eradicated. However, recent policy discourse suggests the federal government is working with state religious councils to standardise the minimum age of eighteen.

Correspondingly, Malaysia reported a lower adolescent birth rate compared to the global average: in 2022, Six of every 1,000 girls aged 15–19 gave birth, while the global figure stood at 39 per 1,000. This trend is visible in **Figure 2**.

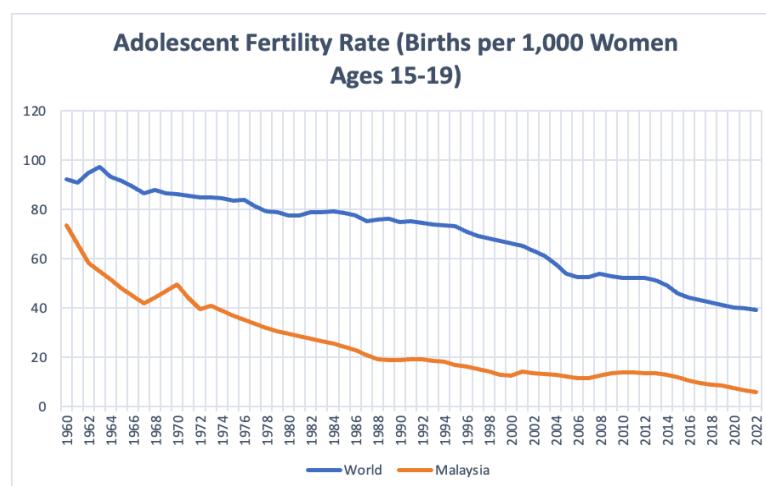


Figure 2. Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 women ages 15–19) in Malaysia and globally, 1960–2022. Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal (2024).

Another significant change concerns the passage of the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act 2022 (Act 840), which will provide dedicated mechanisms to seek redress for victims of sexual harassment (KPWKM, 2023). The act aims to establish a special sexual harassment tribunal that will handle complaints in a less formal, victim-friendly setting outside the regular courts. Women’s rights groups had campaigned for this law for years, and its enactment is considered a victory of the #MeToo era activism (the #SayaJuga movement in Malaysia) in pushing the government toward better legal protection (Aminudin, 2024). As part of implementation, the Malaysian Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development is in the process of setting up the Tribunal and rolling out awareness programmes so that women (and men) nationwide know their rights under the new Act.

As previously stated, in 2022, Malaysia amended the Employment Act of 1995 to extend paid maternity leave in the private sector to 98 days from its original 60 days (Rodzi, 2023). While it aligns closer to international standards, it is still short of the 14 weeks recommended by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). To reduce the burden for mothers, the government also introduced a seven-day paternity leave for married male employees. The amended act also prohibits termination of employment due to pregnancy. As well, the Malaysian government has introduced tax incentives for women returning to work after career breaks, grants and budget allocations to expand childcare centres (including a RM30 million fund to establish childcare centres in government buildings and hospitals) (Abdul Hamid & Muzafar, 2024). These are all part of a concentrated effort to raise female labour force participation to 60 percent by 2025.

4.4 Grassroots Movements

Grassroots movements in Malaysia have remained the central engine behind the progress in women's rights. Decades-old NGOs like the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO), All Women's Action Society (AWAM), Sisters in Islam (SIS), Women's Centre for Change (WCC), and Engender exist to provide shelters and hotlines for women in need. On top of that, they also produce reports, train policymakers, and act as a legal memory in a system designed to forget. WAO's detailed case documentation has pushed for expanded definitions of domestic violence and longer protection orders (Women's Aid Organisation, 2018). All organisations listed, among others, make up the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG), which drove the sexual harassment bill forward, not once, but repeatedly, until it passed (Ames, 2022).

Additionally, Movements like #MakeSchoolASaferPlace, started by then-17-year-old Ain Husniza, have also influenced national discourse. Ain Husniza's TikTok video exposing a teacher's rape joke triggered a digital outpouring of scrutiny, forcing the Ministry of Education to create school-level reporting mechanisms (Aminudin, 2024). Effectively, Malaysian girls and women are using social media to empower themselves and speak out against abuses.

4.5 Malaysian Case Study

Each year around International Women's Day (March 8th), activists in Malaysia organise a Women's March to advocate for gender equality and related causes. These marches, while modest in size compared to some countries, have become a symbol of feminist activism and solidarity in Malaysia since the first major march in 2018. The Women's March Malaysia 2023 was planned as a peaceful assembly in Kuala Lumpur on March 12, 2023 with a broad manifesto including calls to end GBV, uphold reproductive rights, and ensure equality for all genders (Palatino, 2023). In global forums, the Malaysian government often touts its respect for democratic freedoms and the role of women in civil society; therefore, there is an expectation of greater civic openness. However, what unfolded around the 2023 Women's March highlighted a disconnect between stated support for women's empowerment and on-the-ground repression of women's activism.

On the day of the march, a few participants carried rainbow flags and placards supporting LGBTQIA+ rights alongside women's rights messages. This became a flashpoint. Almost immediately, conservative politicians, and religious groups lambasted the event, accusing it of promoting "western lifestyles" and tarnishing the women's cause by associating with LGBTQIA+ issues. The authorities reacted by opening a police investigation into the march (Gaebee, 2019; Palatino, 2023; Vochelet, 2023). Within days, police summoned the organisers and several participants for questioning, alleging possible violations, such as failure to give sufficient notice and breaching protest regulations (Palatino, 2023; Vochelet, 2023). The authorities' focus on the presence of LGBTQIA+ supporters overshadowed the

march's primary agenda on women's issues and effectively derailed public discussion into a moral policing narrative. It demonstrated how quickly the space for women to mobilise can shrink when their advocacy challenges conservative social norms, even indirectly.

The inquiry into the Women's March 2023 had a chilling effect in the immediate term. The organisers of the march reported cases of online harassment, even fearing legal action. This incident shows that while there is great progress for women in Malaysia, activists still face great personal risks. However, the police ultimately did not charge the organisers, and by the following year, plans for Women's March 2024 had proceeded, albeit cautiously. Importantly, many Malaysians supported the marchers and were critical of the authorities; hashtags like #WomensMarchMY and #ManaHakKami ("Where are our rights?") trended in solidarity. This pushback forced some government leaders to moderate their tone – the Women's Minister clarified that women have the right to assemble but should "follow procedures". At the same time, some MP's argued in Parliament that focusing on a few rainbow flags missed the forest for the trees (Vochelet, 2023)

Malaysian women are resolute that their rights must include all women, including those from marginalised groups, which is a line that some in power are not yet comfortable with. The hope is that with persistent effort, the contradiction in this case will ease, and future Women's Marches will be viewed not as a threat but as a democratic expression worthy of praise in line with Malaysia's policy ideals.

5. Papua New Guinea



2 Boys Standing on Green Grass Field. Photo source: © Elias Alex/Pexels, December 21st, 2021 at <https://www.pexels.com/photo/2-boys-standing-on-green-grass-field-10404353/>

5.1 Overview of Women's Rights in Papua New Guinea

The Human Rights Watch World Report 2024 stated that Papua New Guinea is an unsafe place for women and girls to be. While there are legislations enacted to secure women and children, such as the Family Protection Act 2013 and the Child Welfare Act 2015, they are weakly implemented. Even with alarmingly high cases of GBV, the police force that is devoted to responding to this matter remains insufficient in number and ability (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Women are systematically sidelined from the formal economy, community participation in governance, and educational opportunities. This marginalisation is perpetuated by fragile institutions, deficient public service provision, and insufficient implementation of gender-responsive policies. In the history of the country's politics, women have been significantly underrepresented, with only nine making it to the National Parliament. The traditional gendered norm of women acting as carers and homemakers permeates the country. This phenomenon relates to the perception that they have no place in decision-making or leadership functions. Physical, social, and psychological aggression are extensively encountered by women and girls, whether in private or in public. Women and children are also affected by intercommunal conflicts between tribes, as they are occasionally presented as compensation to reach a reconciliation (Sauer, 2023).

5.2 Major Barriers Faced

01 Gender-Based Violence

GBV has been an unwavering dilemma in Papua New Guinea, with more than 1.5 million people encountering it per year and one woman being beaten every 30 seconds. Out of 15,444 reported cases of domestic abuse in 2020, only 250 perpetrators were pressed charges against, and fewer than 100 were sentenced. A special parliamentary committee dedicated to GBV congregated in May 2021 to carry out a three-day inquiry meant to probe into the measures to safeguard women and girls from all kinds of violence. The committee revealed that victims of GBV were unable to receive support, funding, and cooperation from the state to actively resolve the issues. The police force disclosed that they do not have adequate resources to guarantee an exhaustive investigation for each case, which affects their capacity to keep women and children safe. Consequently, the situation implies authorities' reliance on NGOs and civil society to fill their shortcomings (McLennan, 2021).

At the same time, Papua New Guinea has some of the highest rates in the Western Pacific of mother and newborn morbidity. An enormous number of women tend to avoid giving birth in healthcare institutions and go for unattended delivery because of their apprehensions regarding the standard of treatment. This perception comes from the lack of skilled labour attendants in the country and basic facilities to guarantee a clean and safe environment for delivery. Another critical factor is women's fear of their family's reaction and the shame they face for seeking medical attention (World Health Organization, 2019).

1.5 million encountering GBV per year

02 Cultural Traditions and Norms

The country's culture of polygamy and bride price is attributed as one of the underlying causes of GBV. A man having several wives frequently instigates friction between the women and the man, which gives rise to violence when wealth is not evenly distributed among the wives. This custom also drives a wedge between women because of envy and the feeling of competition. Concerning bride price, it sparks discord in the family because if the payment is not made, the wife's kin will engage in an altercation with the husband. On the other hand, payment implies a notion of ownership, which emboldens husbands to mistreat their wives. The civil society is concerned about how these traditions are hampering the progress in putting an end to GBV (Kep, 2017).

03 Limited Access to Justice

Despite the introduction of measures such as the National Strategy to Respond to and End Gender-Based Violence (2016-2025) to improve the situation of women, tangible progress remains ambivalent. On the contrary, the mistreatment of women has deteriorated further, highlighting significant gaps in implementation and effectiveness. According to the Chairman of the Permanent Parliamentary Committee on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, Powes Parkop, he identified several contributing factors to the lack of progress, including the frequent failure to convict offenders, insufficient government ownership in effectively implementing the National Strategy, and prevailing attitudes and perceptions among men (POSTCOURIERONLINE, 2025).

With matters involving domestic violence, they are not often taken seriously by law enforcers, as they scarcely proceed with filing for criminal charges or conducting investigations if perpetrators are family members, regardless of how serious the case is. Instead, they often opt for mediation or compensation as a means of resolution. In rural areas, the police would request monetary offerings before taking action on the reported incidents. Additionally, there exists a significant shortage of services for those who have encountered violence at the hands of family members. There is inadequacy in the resources available, including safe shelters, professional counselling, case management, financial assistance, and legal support (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

04 Political Underrepresentation

Women are underrepresented in political positions, composing less than two percent of the MPs in the country. Since Papua New Guinea's independence in 1975, only nine women MPs have been elected. This unveils their struggle to assume leadership roles despite their competencies and the lack of policies that enable their participation. In effect, women's needs and burdens are not promoted adequately in decision-making and are thereby also not reflected in the ordinances and programs. The previous report shows that female candidates are put in an unfavourable position because of crooked politics that involve corruption and maltreatment (Whiting, 2022).

5.3 Recent Developments

The National Parliament of Papua New Guinea (2022) formed a Permanent Parliamentary Committee on Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment and Gender-Based Violence (GEWE-GBV) to demonstrate its obligation to confront the widespread violence against women. The Committee is supported by the UNDP, which will be providing technical guidance. Alongside the fight against GBV, the Committee aspires to advocate for women's rights and encourage their involvement in the Parliament.

The Joint Parliamentary Women's Caucus was established in 2023 to gather the women constituents of the Parliament of Papua New Guinea and the Bougainville House of Representatives. The Caucus periodically convenes to discuss its agenda to facilitate gender equality and to increase women's representation in the government. Among the main topics that have been deliberated were legislative mechanisms to boost the leadership of women in governing institutions, as well as the provision of programs aimed at capacity-building and campaign assistance for women who aspire to run in the elections. Through the feedback system in place, they can gather suggestions from key stakeholders to enhance the action plan (UNDP, 2024).

The Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) in Papua New Guinea passed the Gender, Equality, Women's Empowerment, Peace and Security Policy 2023-2027, which is a breakthrough policy that will advance women's active engagement in society by helping to abolish the obstacles that disadvantage them. The policy is fervent in empowering women and fostering gender equality so they can live safely and have access to education and employment. In connection with this, an Office of Gender Equality will be set up to have a specialised team that will focus on ameliorating women's and girls' rights (UN Women, 2024).

5.4 Initiatives From The Ground

The civil society in Papua New Guinea has been instrumental in addressing gaps left by government services and policy implementation. Through networks of activists and community groups, they can reach the vulnerable individuals with limited access to resources.

One of them is Vote Women for Change, a program sponsored by the Australian National University and the Australian government, meant to bring enlightenment to the public about the importance of representation in parliament, aiming to equip them as smart voters. It also includes workshops for aspiring women leaders to encourage and mentor them about campaigning (Whiting, 2022).

Additionally, Kup Women for Peace (KWP) is a group formed by activists who are dedicated to peacebuilding and upholding women's rights by addressing disputes, GBV, and violence connected to sorcery allegations. Among others, the group facilitated peace talks with clashing tribes, which the members tried to mediate at a community level. These disputes often lead to bloodshed that, in effect, interrupts school and restricts activities to earn income, such as livelihood and farming. In these circumstances, women, and children are extensively affected by illness and unhealthy diets. They also work towards establishing partnerships with civil society organisations and politicians to lobby for their causes and spread awareness to restore peace (UNDP, 2023).

5.5 Harsh Realities For Women

Several women have been assaulted due to accusations of practicing sorcery, which typically occurs in the event of abrupt deaths or sickness. Although some men were attributed to sorcery in the past, the typical target has been women. For instance, a woman and her daughter from Goroka, Eastern Highlands, were rescued by the police from the capture and the physical abuse of the woman's husband's relatives. They were blamed for the husband's death, even though it was presumed that he died because of COVID-19 (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Meanwhile, the murder case of Imelda Tupi Tiamanda, which disturbed the entire nation, was dismissed on September 3rd, 2021 due to insufficient evidence. Three men who were charged with manslaughter were set free from prison, and one of them was her husband. This verdict came to light despite the discovery of her remains in the back of her husband's car, which was inspected by the police at a checkpoint. At that time, the other two suspects were also present in the car, and the husband has allegedly admitted guilt to the crime (McLennan, 2021).

In a tragic event, several women and girls as young as 12 years old met a wretched fate in Walagu village in 2023 when a gang of men carrying weapons physically and sexually assaulted them. They were held captive for days as the gang was trying to demand a ransom. After negotiations, the hostages were set free in exchange for money and pigs. Unfortunately, kidnapping has not been an isolated occurrence, and citizens have expressed concerns over how the rape of minor girls is increasingly being used as a tactic to instill fear and intimidate their communities. With the minimal presence of police officers in the region, the government is asked to tighten law and order (Swanston & Gunga, 2023).

**One woman is beaten
every 30 seconds**

6. Philippines



Filipina women in traditional clothing. Photo source: © Kim Villanueva via Pexels, February 24th, 2024 at <https://www.pexels.com/photo/woman-in-traditional-clothing-in-festival-20383031/>

6.1 Overview of Women's Rights Landscape

Over the past decades, the landscape of women's rights in the Philippines has significantly evolved. Compared to their counterparts in the Southeast Asia region, Filipino women have relatively enjoyed legal protections due to progressive legislation and strong feminist movements. As per the Progress Report on the Philippines' Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action from 2019 to 2024, the Philippines is ranked 25th globally and Third among Asia-Pacific economies in the 2024 Global Gender Gap Index (Philippine Commission on Women, 2024). The report also indicated that the country ranked First in the Educational Attainment Index, which means gender equality in education is at parity (Philippine Commission on Women, 2024).

These accomplishments underscore the substantial progress made in legislation and public policy efforts aimed at strengthening the rights of Filipino women and ensuring their protection under the law. However, it is important to acknowledge that there are still areas where the protection of women's rights requires further attention and improvement.

6.2 Key Challenges and Gaps

Despite the existence of legal frameworks that advocate for women's rights, systemic issues persist, impeding gender equality within the country. Cultural beliefs and gender stereotypes that are imposed upon women continue to pose a barrier to their realization of empowerment. Furthermore, there are areas that require improvement, such as eliminating violence against women and children, increasing access to reproductive health services, and promoting economic empowerment (Philippine Commission on Women, 2024).

6.3 Recent Policy & Legislative Developments

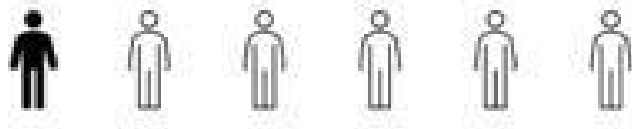
The Republic Act 9710, commonly known as the Magna Carta of Women, is the cornerstone of the nation's legislative framework for safeguarding women's rights. This landmark legislation draws inspiration from the CEDAW. The primary objective of the Magna Carta of Women is to uphold the human rights of women and ensure their protection from all forms of violence.

To achieve this objective, the law incorporates gender mainstreaming programmes into the government's operational framework. Notably, it allocates a dedicated Gender and Development budget, comprising at least five percent of a government agency's budgetary outlays, to facilitate the implementation of these programmes. The "financing with a gender perspective" approach employed by the law has proven instrumental in the Philippines' substantial investment of approximately \$18.9 billion in gender-related initiatives (Philippine News Agency, 2024).

In addition to the Magna Carta of Women, the Philippines has enacted several other notable legislations that address gender-related concerns. The Republic Act 9262, commonly referred to as the Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children (VAWC) Act, aims to combat the escalating incidence of violence perpetrated against women and their children. This legislation encompasses a comprehensive range of acts, including physical, psychological, sexual, and economic violence.

Conversely, the Republic Act 11313, known as the Safe Spaces Act, specifically targets gender-based sexual harassment committed in public spaces, educational institutions, workplaces, and online platforms and provides a legal framework for ensuring a safe environment for individuals affected by such harassment (Philippine Commission on Women, 2021).

Another recent piece of legislation enacted in 2021 is Republic Act No. 11596, commonly known as the Act Prohibiting the Practice of Child Marriage. This law defines a child as any individual under the age of eighteen. Child marriage is particularly prevalent in Muslim communities and among indigenous populations.



1/6 of Filipino girls are married before reaching 18 y/o

The Philippine Statistics Authority reports that one in six Filipino girls is married before reaching eighteen years of age, which significantly increases their vulnerability to domestic abuse. The Philippine Commission on Women lauds this recent development and comments that with this new law, “*we can protect girls from being trapped in unwanted marriage, early pregnancy, violence, and other violations to their human rights and dignity*” (Philippine Commission on Women, 2022).

6.4 Civil Society & Grassroots Initiatives

The GABRIELA National Alliance of Filipino Women (GABRIELA) is a grassroots alliance of numerous organisations dedicated to advancing the rights of Filipino women. Established in 1984, its primary objective is to empower and educate Filipino women, particularly those marginalised in society.

Additionally, there exists a party-list organisation bearing the same name, the GABRIELA Women’s Party (General Assembly Binding Women for Reform, Integrity, Equality, Leadership, and Action). This party-list represents and advocates for the rights of Filipino women within the House of Representatives. The names of these organisations are inspired by Gabriela Silang, a revered Philippine revolutionary heroine who emerged during the Spanish colonial era.

6.5 Data Highlights and Trends

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, the functional literacy rate of women aged 10 to 64 years is relatively high at 92.9 percent, surpassing the literacy rate of men at 90.2 percent. However, the labour force participation rate is lower at 53.5 percent compared to men at 75.8 percent (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2025).

Indicator (%)	Women	Men
Functional Literacy Rate for 10-64 Years Old	92.9 %	90.2 %
Labour Force Participation Rate	53.5 %	75.8 %

Source: Philippine Statistics Authority, '2025 Fact Sheet on Women and Men in the Philippines'.

Another issue of concern regarding gender equality is the property rights of women. The data indicates that only approximately 19 percent of Emancipation Patents and around 31 percent of Certificates of Land Ownership Awards issued by the Department of Agrarian Affairs are issued to women. These figures suggest that women are not yet fully participating in land ownership and exercising their property rights (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2025).

Indicator	Women	Men
% of Holders of Emancipation Patent	96, 626	423,259
% of Holders of Certificate of Land Ownership Award	642, 855	1,424,783

Source: Philippine Statistics Authority, '2025 Fact Sheet on Women and Men in the Philippines'.

Furthermore, gender violence remains a pervasive problem. Based on the 2022 National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS), approximately 9.8 percent of women have experienced physical violence, 1.5 percent have experienced sexual violence, 2.7 percent have experienced both physical and sexual violence, and 14 percent have experienced physical or sexual violence (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2024).

Forms of Violence	Total (%)
Physical violence only	9.8
Sexual violence only	1.5
Physical and sexual violence only	2.7
Physical or sexual violence	14

Source: Philippine Statistics Authority, '2024 Fact Sheet on Women and Men in the Philippines'

Additionally, the total number of women who have been victims of violence is 19,228 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2024).

6.6 Notable Case Studies

In the realm of jurisprudence, there has been a growing recognition of gender equality. Notably, in a recent case, the Supreme Court of the Philippines declared unconstitutional a provision within a Collective Bargaining Agreement between flight attendants and Philippine Airlines, Inc. The Agreement stipulated that the compulsory retirement age for women was 55 years, while for men, it was 60 years. The Supreme Court held that there was no substantial legal basis for differentiating the retirement age based on sex and ruled that the provision constituted discrimination against women (Public Information Office, 2023).

In the context of health, the UN Population Fund highlights the Philippines as an intriguing case study. While the country has enacted legislation to promote women's welfare, significant inequalities persist that impede access to reproductive health services, particularly for women belonging to Indigenous groups or residing in impoverished areas. Data reveals a concerning trend, with a 35.13 percent increase in the birth rate of young girls under 15 years old in 2022 compared to the previous year (Cabalza, 2024).

Addressing the gaps and challenges in the law presents the Philippines with substantial opportunities to fully realise women's rights. Despite the continued existence of GBV and discrimination, the growing strength of women's organisations and their increasing participation in the labour force offer a glimmer of hope for a more equitable future.

7. Singapore



Women in Singapore riding a bicycle. Photo source: © Singapore Stock Images, November 11th, 2021 via Pixabay at <https://pixabay.com/photos/women-bicycle-street-geylang-street-6781342/>

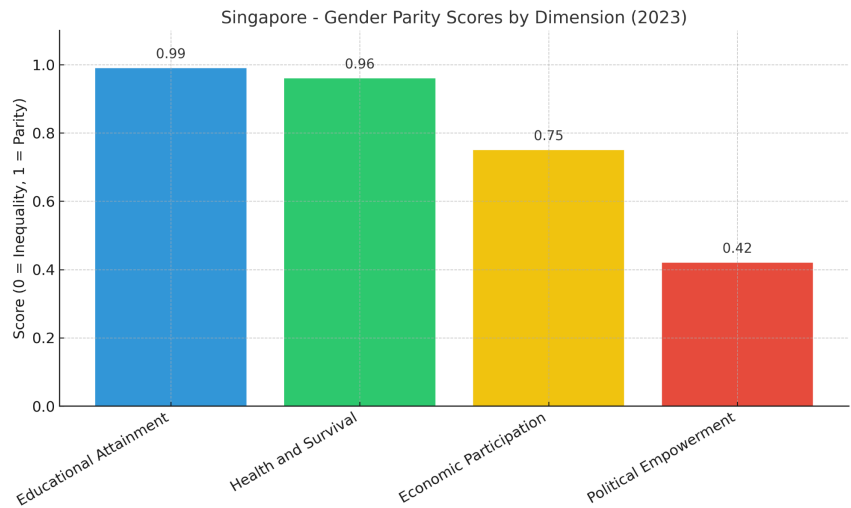
7.1 Overview of Women's Rights Landscape

Singapore presents a mixed landscape in terms of women's rights. On one hand, the country has achieved high scores in global gender parity indicators, particularly in education, health, and economic participation (World Economic Forum, 2023). Women in Singapore enjoy strong legal protections against discrimination in the workplace and have access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare services (UN Women, 2022).

However, persistent gender stereotypes, under-representation in political and corporate leadership, and challenges related to family and caregiving responsibilities continue to affect the full realisation of gender equality (McKinsey & Company, 2023; Council for Board Diversity, 2023). Recent years have witnessed a shift in public discourse, with stronger advocacy around issues such as sexual harassment, domestic violence, and support for single mothers (AWARE, 2023).

The launch of Singapore's White Paper on Women's Development (2022) marked a milestone in institutionalising gender equality goals and outlining actionable strategies for advancement (Singapore Ministry of Social and Family Development [MSF], 2022). Singapore demonstrates a strong overall performance in gender parity, particularly in education and health. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2023, the country scores 0.99 in

Educational Attainment and 0.96 in Health and Survival, reflecting near-parity in these domains (World Economic Forum, 2023). However, progress is less pronounced in Economic Participation (0.75) and Political Empowerment (0.42), highlighting ongoing challenges in closing leadership and representation gaps. These disparities illustrate the nuanced landscape of women’s rights in Singapore, where access and outcomes in basic services are equitable, yet structural barriers persist in decision-making arenas (World Economic Forum, 2023; McKinsey & Company, 2023).



McKinsey & Company – Asia-Pacific Gender Parity Scorecard (2023) *"The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in Asia Pacific – Singapore Snapshot"*

7.2 Key Challenges and Gaps

Gender Stereotypes and Unpaid Care Work

Cultural expectations continue to assign caregiving and household responsibilities predominantly to women. According to the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), women spend 2.4 times more time on unpaid care work than men (MSF, 2022), limiting their participation in the workforce.

Workplace Gender Gap

Despite near-equal educational attainment, women remain under-represented in senior leadership roles. As of 2023, women held only 21.5 percent of board seats in the top 100 primary-listed companies on the Singapore Exchange (SGX), despite steady improvements (Council for Board Diversity, 2023).

Legal Gaps in LGBTQIA+ Protection

While Singapore repealed Section 377A (criminalising sex between men) in 2022, LGBTQIA+ women still lack legal recognition in areas such as marriage, family planning, and housing rights. The repeal of Section 377A in Singapore caused a major shift in LGBTQIA+ rights, though many activists note that broader equality remains a distant goal (World Peace Foundation, 2022).

Digital Harassment

Online GBV, including doxxing and non-consensual sharing of images, remains an emerging challenge, particularly for young women and activists (AWARE, 2023).

7.3 Recent Policy and Legislative Developments

White Paper on Women's Development (2022)

The culmination of a year-long national engagement, the paper proposed 25 action plans across five key areas, including workplace fairness, caregiving support, and protection against violence (MSF, 2022). Key results include increased paid paternity leave and the development of the Workplace Fairness Legislation, currently under public consultation (MSF, 2023).

Expansion of the Maintenance of Parents Act (2023)

New amendments support elderly women by reinforcing their right to financial support from children and addressing gendered eldercare vulnerabilities (Singapore Parliament, 2023).

Workplace Fairness Legislation (expected 2025)

This will make it illegal to discriminate based on gender in hiring, promotion, and dismissal (Ministry of Manpower, 2023). Currently, such disputes are handled through mediation without strong enforcement power.

7.4 Civil Society and Grassroots Initiatives

Singapore's civil society plays a pivotal role in advancing women's rights, often filling the gaps left by state institutions and amplifying the voices of marginalised groups. Several local organisations and community-led initiatives have emerged or gained momentum in recent years, offering critical services, support, and advocacy for gender justice.

AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research)

AWARE remains the leading gender equality organisation in Singapore. It operates across various spheres, including policy advocacy, research, and direct services. Through its Sexual Assault Care Centre (SACC), AWARE provides trauma-informed support, legal aid, and crisis counselling to survivors of sexual violence (AWARE, 2023). The organisation has also spearheaded campaigns on workplace discrimination, carer inequalities, and abortion rights, influencing both public discourse and legislative reviews.

Women Unbounded

Launched in 2023, Women Unbound is an intergenerational mentorship programme that supports young women and girls, particularly those from low-income or minority backgrounds. It focuses on leadership training, civic engagement, and confidence-building, aiming to bridge opportunity gaps through long-term community support (Women Unbounded, 2023). The programme partners with educators, social workers, and women's leaders across industries to promote inclusive empowerment strategies.

Beyond the Hijab

Beyond the Hijab is a grassroots feminist collective advocating for intersectionality in discussions around gender in Singapore. It focuses on the lived experiences of Muslim women, addressing issues such as religious dress codes, moral policing, and racialised gender narratives (Beyond the Hijab, 2023). The group uses storytelling, education, and digital activism to contest normative representations and foster solidarity across communities.

Cassia Resettlement Team (CRT)

The Cassia Resettlement Team is a volunteer-driven initiative that supports elderly women, especially those relocated to rental flats under Singapore's public housing scheme.

CRT highlights the intersection of ageing, economic insecurity, and gender by providing emotional support, advocacy for housing rights, and public awareness of issues often overlooked in policy frameworks (CRT, 2023). It exemplifies a gendered approach to elder care and poverty alleviation at the hyper-local level. These initiatives showcase the dynamism of Singapore’s civil society in addressing women’s rights holistically, linking everyday lived experiences to structural inequalities, and fostering community-based resilience (AWARE, 2023; Beyond the Hijab, 2023).

7.5 Data Highlights and Trends

Labour Force Participation

As of 2024, the labour force participation rate for women aged 25–64 reached 79.3 percent, up from 76.2 percent in 2020 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2024). However, the gender pay gap persists at approximately 14.3 percent, despite narrowing over the decade (MOM, 2024).

Boardroom Representation

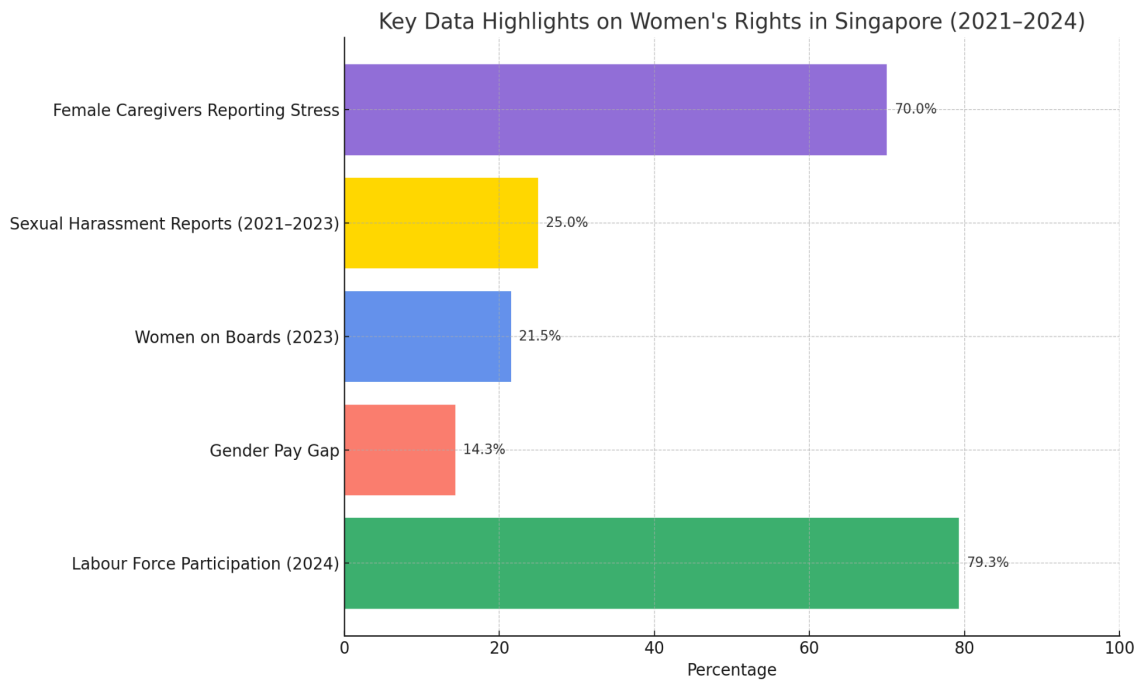
The proportion of women on boards rose to 21.5 percent in 2023, exceeding targets set by the Council for Board Diversity but still falling short of parity (Council for Board Diversity, 2023).

Reporting of Sexual Harassment

Post #MeToo momentum in Singapore led to a 25 percent increase in sexual harassment reporting from 2021–2023, highlighting both growing awareness and persistent risks (AWARE, 2023).

Caregiver Burden

Surveys indicate that 72 percent of informal carers are women, and among them, a significant proportion report psychological stress and financial strain (MSF, 2023).



Data compiled from World Bank, Singapore Ministry of Manpower, Council for Board Diversity, AWARE Singapore, BMC Geriatrics, and McKinsey & Company (2020–2024).

7.6 Notable Case Studies

The Case of Monica Baey (2019–2022)

After a voyeurism incident at the National University of Singapore and subsequent public backlash over the university’s and judiciary’s lenient response, Monica’s activism sparked national conversations (The Straits Times, 2022). This led to increased penalties for sexual offences and institutional reforms across Singapore universities (Ministry of Education, 2022).

AWARE’s Helpline for Single Mothers

This targeted intervention, launched in 2022, revealed systematic gaps in housing policy, as unmarried mothers remain excluded from Housing & Development Board (HDB) family schemes (AWARE, 2022). Advocacy from civil society has since pressured the government to review its stance.

Repeal of Section 377A (2022)

While focused on the LGBTQIA+ community broadly, this legislative shift opened new conversations on inclusive feminism and the legal rights of queer women in Singapore (World Peace Foundation, 2022).

8. Thailand



Woman Traditional Wear © by suhkryfoto017 via Pixabay, February 2, 2021
<https://pixabay.com/photos/woman-traditional-wear-thai-fashion-5970449/>

8.1 Overview of Women's Rights Landscape

Gender equality in Thailand has been promoted as a part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thailand's commitment to gender equality was reflected in the improvement of its ranking in the 2024 Global Gender Gap Index by rising from 74th to 65th out of 146 countries. In East Asia and the Pacific, Thailand regionally ranks fifth out of 18 countries in gender equality (OHCHR, 2024).

Legislative and institutional frameworks in Thailand embedded gender equality as an integral part. For example, the Constitution of Thailand B.E. 2560 (2017) ensures equality between men and women while forbidding sexual discrimination (OHCHR, 2024). The Constitution also provided gender-responsive budgeting in Section 71, which sets out the requirement for government agencies to consider the needs of different genders in budget allocation (Women's Empowerment Principles, 2022).

Notably, the Gender Equality Act B.E. 2558 (2015) serves as Thailand's key legislation that protects citizens from all forms of gender-based discrimination (OHCHR, 2024). The Department of Women's Affairs and Family Development (DWF) under the

Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS) functions as the coordinating government agency for women's rights (DWF, 2023). Additionally, two action plans were adopted as national guidelines for the improvement of women's rights.

- The Women's Development Action Plan (2023-2027) sets Thailand's priority for women's empowerment in several areas, ranging from human capital and participation in decision-making to the elimination of violence against women (DWF, 2023).
- The Gender Equality Promotion Action Plan (2023-2027) aims to shift attitudes, raise awareness, and promote support for gender equality across different organisations in Thailand (DWF, 2024).

8.2 Key challenges for women in Thailand

Women's workforce participation

In past decades, women in Thailand have been empowered economically. In 2024, national statistics demonstrated a narrow gender gap as women were capable of contributing to 46.42 percent of the Thai labour force, compared to 53.58 percent for men (DWF, 2025). Thai women have particularly thrived in the private sector (Kusakabe, 2024). For example, female chief executive officers (CEOs) represent 32 percent of senior leadership positions in Thai businesses, reflecting a higher percentage than the world average of 27 percent (Women's Empowerment Principles, 2022; Kusakabe, 2024).

Despite Thailand's efforts to close the gender gap, Thai women continue to face several limitations that prevent them from participating actively in the labour market to their full capacity (World Bank, 2023). Among 59.24 million workers above the age of 15 nationwide, the employment-to-population ratio in the same year revealed that 59.97 percent of women and 75.97 percent of men were economically active (DWF, 2025).

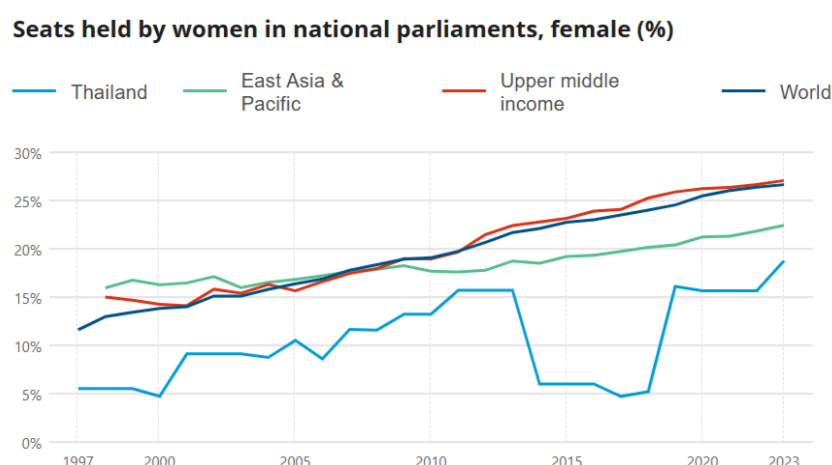
The main challenge stemmed from gender stereotypes and social expectations in Thai society, which placed heavy responsibilities solely on women to provide unpaid care and domestic work (World Bank, 2023). These persistent issues have put Thai women in a disadvantaged position in employment (UNDP, 2022).

Patriarchy has been central to social norms in Thailand, shaping a biased perception of men as leaders at work or breadwinners at home (OECD Development Centre, 2023). On the contrary, women in Thailand were often viewed as wives or mothers who should care for a household (OHCHR, 2024). Differences between maternity and paternity leave policies in Thailand can be considered a noteworthy example of imbalanced gender roles. 98 days are given for paid maternity leave in contrast to only 15 days for paternity leave in the private sector (OHCHR, 2024). In some cases, women also faced wage penalties as a result of maternity leave (World Bank, 2023).

The lack of social assistance for motherhood and carers hinders women's career growth (OHCHR, 2024). Despite having a better ability to hire care workers, Thai women started leaving their jobs as early as the age of 45 to care for children, elderly family members, and people with disabilities. In contrast, Thai men had a longer time in employment, as they started retiring from the age of 55 (World Bank, 2023).

Women's political representation

In contrast to high participation in the labour force, women's political representation in Thailand remained significantly low at both the national and local levels (World Bank Group, 2023; Rueankham, 2024).



Source: World Bank Group. (2023). *Thailand*. Retrieved April 17, 2025, from World Bank Group: Gender Data Portal.

Despite a drastic drop during a military government between 2014 and 2018, the percentage of female members of parliament rose up to only 18.8 percent, which was lower than the world average of 26.7 percent and regional average of 22.5 percent in 2023 (World Bank Group, 2023). Moreover, 10.4 percent of women held seats in the senate and 11.4 percent in the parliamentary committees. In the executive branch, 22 percent of the cabinet members were women, with four female ministers (OHCHR, 2024).

Similar data was present at the local level. Less than 20 percent of local politicians were women. Among chief executives of provincial administrative organisations, only 7.1 percent were women, while chief executives at sub-district offices comprised 9.21 percent of women (OECD Development Centre, 2023).

This trend is also rooted in the gender stereotype that men are normatively perceived to possess better leadership qualities (Nachemson, 2023). As a result, the male-dominated nature of Thai politics suppressed women from being elected and progressing in this field. To advance in politics, Thai women had to rely on male political patrons to rise to positions of power (Rueankham, 2024).

For example, the only two female prime ministers of Thailand were related to the former prime minister Dr Thaksin Shinawatra, whose connection was strongly tied with the Phue Thai Party (Head, Dokson, & Ng, 2024). In 2024, Shinawatra's daughter, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, was nominated by the Phue Thai Party to assume office as the youngest and the second female prime minister. In 2011, his younger sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, won a landslide election and became the first female prime minister and defence minister in Thai history (Head, Dokson, & Ng, 2024).

Although there has been a cultural shift in which female political leaders gained more political support, it is undeniable that only women from prestigious backgrounds and strong political networks had more advantages than their peers to enter politics (Sinpeng & Savirani, 2022).

Gender-based violence and sexual harassment

GBV remains a detrimental challenge to the well-being of women and girls across Thailand. More than 30,000 sexual violence complaints were filed each year, but only around 16 percent of these cases were reported to police authorities, and only around five percent led to an arrest (UNFPA, 2024; OHCHR, 2024).

In 2022, domestic violence was the most reported GBV case to the DWF, with the highest rate of 65 percent (DWF, 2023). Nearly 90 percent of the reported cases derived from women and girls. "One in six Thai women in heterosexual cohabiting relationships have experienced domestic violence in their lifetimes" (Fortify Rights, 2025).



Source: Fortify Rights. (2025, March 20). *Thailand: Ensure Effective Remedies for Survivors of Domestic Violence*. Retrieved April 17, 2025, from Fortify Rights.

However, the police data did not reflect the same statistics. Only 158 complaints on domestic violence were filed, while only ten cases were prosecuted (OHCHR, 2024). Although Thailand enacted the Domestic Violence Victims Protection Act B.E. 2550 (2007)

to protect its citizens from GBV within a household, the legislation “over-emphasises family reconciliation over perpetrator accountability” (OHCHR, 2024).

Another prevalent form of GBV in Thailand is sexual harassment against women and girls, both offline and online. Although several legislations in Thailand prohibit sexual harassment practices, this problem has been tenacious, particularly in Thai politics (Sinpeng & Savirani, 2022). Female political leaders and activists suffered the most from sexual harassment tactics such as hate speech, defamation, and intimidation. The lack of strict criminalisation against sexual harassment offences played a role in discouraging women from joining political parties (OHCHR, 2024). As Thai women continue to suffer from sexual harassment, “*Thailand is one of the most unsafe places for women political leaders in the ASEAN region*” (Sinpeng & Savirani, 2022).

The low rate of GBV reports potentially coincided with small numbers of women working in Thailand’s justice sector, with only 10.97 percent of female police officers, 30.87 percent of female public prosecutors, and 35.65 percent of female judges (Isranews, 2024).

The 2024 UN Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls highlighted gender discrimination that women faced in pursuing a career in policing and law enforcement (OHCHR, 2024). For example, women are not allowed to pursue a bachelor’s degree at the Royal Police Cadet Academy (RPCA) due to the requirement for applicants to have completed a pre-cadet academy, which only young men could attend. As the RPCA is the only institution that produces commissioned police officers, men have a better chance of commencing their careers much earlier than women (OHCHR, 2024; Arendt, 2020).

This dataset raised concerns about the lack of a gender-inclusive approach and the delay in women’s career progression and opportunities to advance in law enforcement, which will likely hinder effective response to GBV (OHCHR, 2024; Arendt, 2020). Additionally, the lack of female officers in the justice sector can likely discourage women from reporting GBV cases (UN WOMEN Australia, 2025).

8.3 Policy developments to address the challenges and gaps

Government policy initiatives

In response to the growing number of women in the labour force, the Thai government initiated the following directives to support working women (UNDP, 2022). First, the Ministry of Interior, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, encouraged local administrative organisations (LAO) to organise early childcare facilities for children aged two to three and kindergartens for children between four and five years old. Second, LAOs are advised to coordinate volunteers who can assist with social and health care for the elderly and people with disability in local communities. However, there has been no

substantive policy to encourage equal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work between men and women (UNDP, 2022).

Additionally, the Thai Government recently has undertaken legislative and regulatory measures to address GBV and sexual harassment against women (OHCHR, 2024). The drafts of three pieces of legislation were set for parliamentary debates. These legislations include the Discrimination Act, Sexual Harassment Act, and Gender Recognition Act. The revision of the Gender Equality Act was also proposed to improve legal instruments to align with international standards (OHCHR, 2024).

To date, the One Stop Crisis Centres (OSCCs) launched by the Ministry of Public Health remain instrumental to anti-GBV policy in providing medical and psychosocial care to survivors as well as offering legal assistance and referrals to social work agencies (OHCHR, 2024). Temporary shelters have also been established in every province across Thailand, while Family Violence Prevention Operation Centres are also active in assisting survivors of domestic violence (OHCHR, 2024).

International cooperation

The recent bicycling rally, A Safe Journey with Her, was organised in Bangkok, Thailand, on November 24th, 2025 (UN WOMEN, 2024). The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration spearheaded organising this event to raise public awareness regarding GBV. This rally successfully showcased a creative approach to advocating GBV issues in an informal setting (UN WOMEN, 2024). This event was made possible through the partnership with the embassies of Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN WOMEN), and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and the support of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security and Café Velodome (UN WOMEN, 2024).

The rally was a part of 16 Days of Activism against GBV, a civil society-led campaign between November 25th and December 10th, 2024. This campaign consolidated efforts among civil society, government agencies, international organisations, and the private sector to eradicate violence against women and girls ahead of the 30th anniversary of the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) (UN WOMEN, 2024).

8.4 Civil society initiatives

Women and Men Progressive Movement Foundation (WMP)

WMP is an NGO in Thailand established in 2011, which has been active in promoting gender equality and providing counselling services for survivors of domestic violence and

sexual abuse. WMP engaged with all stakeholders in Thai society to enhance awareness of gender bias and prevent GBV (WMP, 2024).

Since 2022, WMP has initiated ‘Abuse Is Not Love’, a programme that focuses on improving knowledge and awareness of the signs of intimate partner violence among young generations (WMP, 2024). This programme has been implemented in collaboration with Yves Saint Laurent Beauty Thailand (YSL Beauty) under L'Oréal (Thailand) Limited. The Abuse Is Not Love Programme will be delivered through three following activities:

- Funding for academic research relevant to the prevention of intimate partner violence,
- Knowledge dissemination on the nine signs of domestic violence for at least two million people through partner organisations, and
- Training sessions for staff members in YSL Beauty on intimate partner violence (WMP, 2025).

9. Vietnam



A Vietnamese woman is selling vegetables from her bicycle to another woman. Photo source: © Jack Young via Unsplash, May 18th, 2017.
<https://unsplash.com/photos/woman-slicing-vegetable-on-her-bike-stand-near-store-8rViMo16EN0>

9.1 Overview of Women's Rights Landscape in Vietnam

In Vietnam, women and girls' rights have evolved throughout time, emphasising the complex human rights landscape. It has seen some significant progress in its legal framework promoting gender equality in all socio-economic and political spheres and is slowly seeing a change of perspectives on the harmful gender norms.

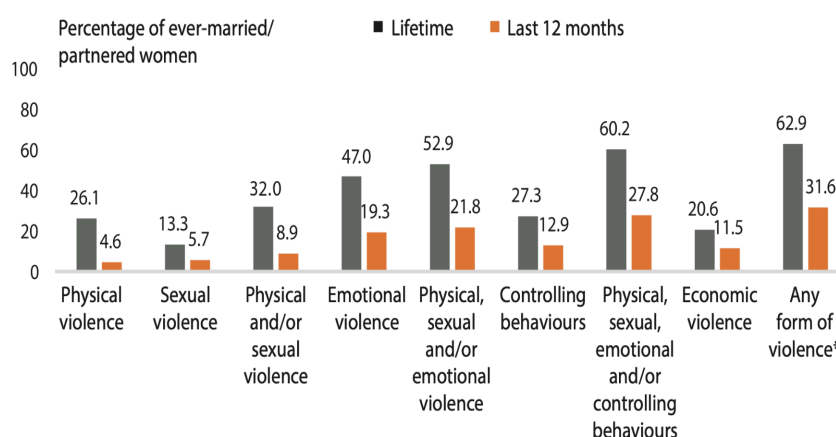
Yet, key challenges are deeply rooted in gender inequality. Reports have revealed dramatic rates of violence against women, highlighting the prevalence of such cases (MOLISA et al., 2020). Despite showing high rates of women in labour activities, women's economic participation and opportunity remain unequal to their male counterparts (ILO, 2021; Preet, 2019). The political empowerment of women remains scarce, with a score of 0.168 by the Gender Inequality Index, where 0 is imparity and One is parity (World Economic Forum, 2024).

9.2 Key Challenges and Gaps

01 Violence against women and girls

Gender inequality and violence against women (VAW) are comparable to a vicious cycle, both a cause and a result of the other. Tackling the prevalence of VAW is thus primordial to reach gender equality around the world and promote women and girls' rights. The 2019 National Study on Violence against Women stated that nearly two in three women (62.9 percent) experienced one or more forms of violence (physical, sexual, emotional, economic, and controlling behaviours) at the hands of their husband or partner throughout their lifetime (*Figure 1*) (MOLISA et al., 2020), emphasising the chronic violence suffered by women and girls denounced by the Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Figure 1: Prevalence of physical, sexual, emotional, and economic violence and controlling behaviours by husband/partner during lifetime and the last 12 months among ever married/partnered women



* 'Any form of violence' includes at least one of the following: physical, sexual, emotional, economic violence or controlling behaviours

Note. From *Summary Report: Results of the National Study on Violence against Women in Viet Nam 2019 – Journey for Change* (p. 24), by MOLISA, GSO & UNFPA, 2020, https://vietnam.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/1_eng_summary_report.pdf. © MOLISA, GSO & UNFPA.

According to the 2019 National Study (MOLISA et al., 2020), most women (90.4 percent) remain silent and do not seek help from formal authorities, with many believing that their suffering was normal and superficial - 51.8 percent of victims believed that their partner's actions were justified or condonable. Such perceptions are rooted in harmful gender perspectives. The various forms of violence have grave consequences on physical well-being, mental health, and economic situations. Children who have grown up in violent households are more likely to participate in a cycle of VAW.

However, a generational shift in young women shows progress as increasingly more individuals are disagreeing with the harmful gender perceptions. Compared to the 2010 study, VAW has decreased except for sexual violence and child abuse, which was considerably higher in 2019, demonstrating that despite minimal progress, the violence is prevalent and a great challenge in Vietnam.

[...] This scar was when he cut me with a bush-hook. This bush-hook is for sugarcane so it is very sharp. He cut me when I was pregnant with the second child. He cut though the tendon at my ankle so I had it sewed in the hospital. It was more than 20 years ago. This scar on my back was when he hit me while I was sleeping. It broke my bone. I took medicine by myself. I still went to school to teach that afternoon. I biked with only one foot. It took me three months to heal that injury. In general, the traces of his violence were all over my body. My face has been like a map with many lines and paths. He cut and broke my legs and hands many times, voiced Mai, a 54-year-old woman in the 2016 study (MOLISA et al., 2020).

02 Economic participation and opportunity & political empowerment

In parallel, despite the GII demonstrating high levels of economic participation (ranking 29th out of 146 countries with a score of 0.751) (WEF, 2024), the data is not comprehensive of all the lived realities. Women are indeed present in the labour market; however, it is more common for them to be hired for office or clerical work, their male counterparts taking up more managerial and supervisory jobs (Preet, 2019). Thus, they are on average found in lower-quality employment than men and are often more prone to participate in unpaid care and domestic work. Hence, women must manage both professional and household responsibilities with wage gaps (ILO, 2021). Despite having overcome some challenges, women are still restrained by considerable hurdles to equal access, opportunity and participation as their male counterparts.

As demonstrated by the GII, political empowerment parity is low, with 11.11 percent of women in ministerial positions compared to 88.89 percent for men (WEF, 2024).

9.3 Women's agency throughout time

Vietnamese historians believe that ancient Vietnam saw a matrilineal social structure in which lineage and inheritance were from the mother (Yu, 1999), placing women at the centre of families, allowing their significant influence in familial and societal affairs, and playing crucial roles in ceremonies, economic activities, and war. In this structure, women were valued.

With the anchored influence of Confucianism, the perspectives and agency of women were altered. The philosophy prioritised patriarchal values and male dominance and limited women to the “Three Submissions” to her father, her husband and her son. “Confucian doctrines relegated women to an inferior social status, making them dependent on male family members for their entire lives” (Vu & Yamada, 2024). Women were restricted from education, labour (besides domestic), thus limiting their possibility of agency and creating a society in which sons were preferred over daughters. Confucianism’s deep influence is arguably still persistent in today’s Vietnam (Vu & Yamada, 2024).

“When war comes, even women have to fight”; in the Indochina and Vietnam wars, women fought alongside their male counterparts, with threefold responsibilities: the household, production and fighting. Women were valiant soldiers and not only victims (Gottschang-Turner, 1999). Wars disrupted traditional and harmful gender roles, opening space for women’s agency in non-traditional roles, particularly in public and military spheres (Taylor, 2003). Yet, the challenged gender norms and female agency were arguably framed by revolutionary goals and were not durable in the long-term.

In 2025, women and girls’ rights are progressing as legal frameworks and mechanisms are created to promote gender equality.

9.4 Policy and Legislations

Article 26 of the 2013 Constitution of Vietnam guarantees gender equality in all sectors and prohibits gender discrimination (The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2013). Beyond the constitutional guarantees, key laws and regulations have been adopted, such as the 2006 Law on Gender Equality. The National Strategy on Gender Equality (2021-2030) is a policy framework aiming to reach certain goals by 2030 on leadership representation, employment, female business leadership, unpaid housework, support for violence survivors, sex ratio at birth, maternal mortality, gender in education, and awareness campaigns (The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2021).

CEDAW was ratified by Vietnam in 1982, signalling its commitment to eliminating discrimination against women in all socio-economic and political spheres. Vietnam also ratified key ILO Conventions related to women’s labour rights.

Vietnam has shown its commitment to reaching gender equality through legal frameworks, national strategies, international commitments and awareness campaigns, though some challenges remain, such as VAW, or socio-economic participation and agency.

9.5 Civil Society & Grassroot Initiatives

To tackle the main limitations on women and girls' rights, it is crucial that organisations and NGOs promote socio-economic and political empowerment, education, and ending VAW. The Asia Foundation supports, through its programme greater female leadership and agency, opportunities for women's education and employment, and security against violence (The Asia Foundation, 2025).

CARE has been working in Vietnam since 1989, and within its programmes it is promoting the rights of women and girls and tackling gender inequalities and VAW, which places disproportionate burdens on women and girls in all paths of life.

CONCLUSION

The journey toward gender equality in Southeast Asia and the Pacific is ongoing and uneven. Across the nine countries examined in this report - Cambodia, Fiji, Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam - women continue to face a broad range of structural and societal barriers that hinder their full participation and rights. While legal frameworks and national commitments exist, many gaps remain between policy and practice, particularly in addressing violence, economic inequality, and political under-representation.

Nonetheless, this region is also home to remarkable determination. Women's rights advocates, community leaders, and civil society organisations are working tirelessly to challenge norms, influence legislation, and build more inclusive societies. Their efforts are a powerful testament to the importance of local action, supported by regional and international solidarity.

Through *Voices Unveiled*, the Global Human Rights Defence (GHRD) seeks not only to document current conditions but also to help drive informed, rights-based action. Progress requires more than awareness - it demands accountability, investment, and inclusive policymaking that truly reflects the lived experiences of women and girls. Moving forward, sustained collaboration among governments, civil society, and international actors is essential to ensure that gender equality is not just an aspiration but a reality across Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

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