

Education, training and skills: Women migrant workers in ASEAN

This Policy Brief considers skills supply and demand in ASEAN in relation to women migrant workers, making recommendations to policy-makers, development partners, social partners and civil society that can improve access for women to skills development opportunities and better jobs. With ASEAN economic integration planning to introduce freer movement of skilled labour, there is a need to standardize and recognize qualifications and skills across the region to ensure efficient and mutually beneficial labour migration. Low and medium skilled labour migration is also predicted to grow, driven by pushes and pulls that result from economic, development and demographic disparities. As the drivers of economic and job growth continue, the informal sector is anticipated to shrink, displacing many workers, most of whom are women employed in low skilled and low paid jobs.¹ Better recognition of women's skills and equal access of women to skills development and skilled opportunities will ensure that women migrant workers benefit from ASEAN economic integration rather than fall victim to it.

Where do women work?²

Across ASEAN, approximately 65 per cent of women workers are engaged in vulnerable employment (i.e. less likely to have formal working arrangements and lacking decent work conditions).³ Women also earn less, due to lower pay in the jobs available and lack of wage protection in the largely informal sectors in which they work (as well as a lack of legal wage protection, for example, in Myanmar). Women migrant workers from developing countries in the

region (Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Viet Nam) are more likely to work in low skilled employment in part because of access to vocational training, primary education, lower literacy, lack of recognized skills, and limited access to financial or information resources.⁴

A significant proportion of intra-ASEAN women's labour migration is into care work (predominantly domestic work).⁵ In the Philippines, for example, in 2011 women migrant workers outnumbered men and over 62 per cent were female domestic workers.⁶ Domestic work is considered unskilled and is largely unregulated. Other sectors in which women work include agriculture (both on farms and in food processing), export-oriented manufacturing industries, construction, entertainment, hospitality and sex work. Women's work is undervalued relative to the jobs that men do, is normally lower paid and considered less skilled than men's work.⁷ For example, in agriculture women are more likely to pick fruit than operate machinery.⁸

Skills that are formally recognized and certified can strengthen a worker's ability to negotiate higher wages and access better jobs. The tendency for

¹ ILO: *ASEAN Economic Community 2015: Enhancing competitiveness and employability through skill development* (Bangkok, 2015), p. 16.

² For more information see ILO and UN Women: *Facts and figures: Women migrant workers in ASEAN* (Bangkok, Policy Brief Series: Women's Labour Migration in ASEAN, 2015).

³ ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. xi; ADB and ILO: *Women and labour markets in Asia: Rebalancing for gender equality* (Bangkok, 2011), p. 12.

⁴ ADB and ILO: *Women and labour markets in Asia: Rebalancing for gender equality* (Bangkok, 2011), p. 13.

⁵ ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 97.

⁶ UN Women: *Managing labour migration in ASEAN: Concerns for women migrant workers* (Bangkok, 2013), p. 14.

⁷ UN Women: *Progress of the world's women 2015-2016 – transforming economies, realizing rights* (New York, 2015), p. 72.

⁸ E. Hellio: "We don't have women in boxes": Channelling seasonal mobility of female farmworkers between Morocco and Andalusia", in J. Gertel and S.R. Sippel (eds): *Seasonal Workers in Mediterranean Agriculture* (London, Earthscan, 2014).

Good practices

- 1 The governments of **Indonesia** and **Singapore** are working together to improve the skills of Indonesian workers who migrate to Singapore – including through exchanges of instructors to provide better training on care work.⁹
- 2 Since 2012, the ILO has facilitated a series of regional and national consultation meetings to push forward the implementation of Mutual Recognition of Skills (MRS) in order to ensure that workers with a modest skill set can have their skills recognized within the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF).
- 3 In **Indonesia**, enrolment for girls in lower secondary school has been boosted through scholarships, food programmes, assistance with transportation and separate sanitation facilities.¹⁰
- 4 The **Philippines** has incorporated language skills into pre-departure training and provides a handbook on specific vocabulary for selected destinations, so migrant workers can improve their language skills while they work.
- 5 The **Republic of Korea** supports the return of migrant workers through their Happy Return Programme, providing access and information on job opportunities and facilitating skills training and business training to maximize the chances of employment on return.¹¹
- 6 The Asia Pacific Skills and Employability Network is an online community of practice for information, news, ideas and events on different aspects of skills development. Supported by the ILO, it provides a platform for discussing ideas and sharing experiences and resources.¹²
- 7 **Indonesia's** policy of requiring formal contracts for migrant workers has incorporated competency-based training, assessment and skills certification.¹³
- 8 The **Philippines** works with returnee domestic workers who taught during their domestic work placement to build on these skills and engage these workers in the public school system.
- 9 **Indonesia** has introduced a programme that provides technical guidance for skills development for returning migrant workers.¹⁴

Key policy recommendations

- 1 Recognize skills in domestic work on the basis of the Regional Model Competency Standards (RCMS) and develop certification systems with recruitment agencies in order to establish different skills levels and employment options.
- 2 Increase the obligation on employers to develop the skills of women working in low skilled employment in manufacturing and construction sectors and provide new employment opportunities to women who have a higher skill level.
- 3 Connect employers in communities of origin with migrant worker recruitment agencies to determine what skills can benefit both the country of destination and origin.
- 4 Build skills recognition into return and reintegration policies, including access to skills testing and certification on return.
- 5 Establish Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) for medium and low skilled work including the care economy, building upon the ILO's Mutual Recognition Scheme.
- 6 Administrative data sources should collect information on migrant workers' skills, in terms of education and occupation as well as economic activity. These should be disaggregated according to sex and age.
- 7 Establish a common system of administrative data collection to monitor and profile the different groups of professionals who migrate under ASEAN's skilled labour mobility scheme.

⁹ W. Soeriaatmadja: "Indonesia hopes to work with Singapore to improve skills of workers abroad", in The Straits Times, 27 Nov. 2014.

¹⁰ ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 56.

¹¹ The Government of the Republic of Korea: Happy Return Program, Employment Permit System, 2010. Available at: https://www.eps.go.kr/en/supp/supp_02.jsp [accessed 21 Oct. 2015].

¹² ILO: Skills and Employability, Asia Pacific Skills and Employability Network, 2012. Available at: <http://apskills.ilo.org> [accessed 21 Oct. 2015].

¹³ ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 88.

¹⁴ UN Women: *Contributions of migrant domestic workers to sustainable development* (Bangkok, 2013), p. 27.

women's skills to be undervalued or not formally recognized, therefore, detrimentally affects women's access to decent work and perpetuates gender wage differentials across the region.¹⁵ Even where women have had the opportunity to obtain skills in their home countries, migration can mean accepting lower skilled positions, effectively 'de-skilling' and creating a situation where neither home nor host country benefit from the skills.¹⁶ Skilled Filipino physicians, for example, accept lower skilled work as nurses or carers in destination countries in order to increase their pay.¹⁷

Understanding the impact of stereotypes

Stereotypes and stigma continue to play a significant role in women's engagement in the labour market. Across the world, labour sectors are often divided along gender lines with women overrepresented in care work, light manufacturing, including garment and footwear, farming and food processing, service sector work and work in the sex and entertainment industries. Conversely men are better able to access jobs and opportunities in booming sectors including construction and industrial manufacturing. Developing skills in these sectors can lead to job opportunities, increased wages and options. Because of gender stereotyping, women are not expected to enter into these sectors and are not encouraged to engage with these subjects in education or skills training. Addressing these stereotypes is crucial to support the transition of women into conventionally male-oriented sectors.¹⁸

Domestic work is traditionally considered to be a female role. It has historically been unpaid and considered as support to those engaged in productive labour. For this reason it is rarely imbued with the same status as productive labour and is undervalued across the world. When domestic work is commodified, this lack of value becomes entrenched, notwithstanding that the provision of domestic work services enables other women to access the labour market for higher earnings.

"When performed by mothers, we call it mothering...when performed by hired hands, we call it unskilled."¹⁹

This also means that there is little in the way of training, skills development or skills recognition within the domestic work sector. The fact that domestic work is undertaken in private homes with private individuals acting as employers and rarely benefits from labour rights protection is a logistical challenge in establishing skills development and recognition programmes.²⁰ In order to address these challenges, recruitment agents or public services could expand their role in providing pre-departure and ongoing skills training and certification as part of the formal migration system.

Skills recognition would help to formalize domestic workers' skills and experience in different areas of domestic work in order to better distinguish these skills and remunerate the worker. The skills necessary to care for children are, for example, vastly different than those required to clean a house. Skills recognition would also promote and support formalizing domestic work and improving protection of domestic workers. Working towards the goal of mutual recognition of skills and qualification, the ILO has established Regional Model Competency Standards (RMCS) on domestic work. These RMCS are the first step towards achieving skills recognition and standardization for this sector (see Text box 1).

What skills is the ASEAN labour market looking for?

It is anticipated that the ASEAN Economic Community will increase the demand for skilled workers, in particular into high skilled production in manufacturing for export from Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. There will also be an increase in the demand for diversified skills, including managerial, technical and core employability skills (such as teamwork, problem solving, information and communications technology, and communication and language skills).²¹ The demand for high skilled employment could grow by as much as 41 per cent, or 14 million workers, between 2010 and 2025.²² With the majority of ASEAN states prioritizing transport, construction and infrastructure, there is a demand for workers with engineering and construction skills such as welding, electrical wiring and bricklaying, work traditionally dominated by men.

Having workers trained and able to access these labour sectors could benefit low to middle income countries seeking to move up the development ladder. The key challenges for these sectors are skills deficits and mismatches – there are not enough workers with the right skills and often too

¹⁵ ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 74.

¹⁶ A. Petrozziello: *Gender on the move: Working on the migration-development nexus from a gender perspective* (Santo Domingo, UN Women, 2013), p. 155.

¹⁷ IOM and OECD: *Harnessing knowledge on the migration of highly skilled women* (Geneva, 2014).

¹⁸ ILO and ADB: *Good global economic and social practices to promote gender equality in the labour market* (Manila, 2013), p. 8.

¹⁹ R. Parrenas: "Migrant Filipina domestic workers and the international division of reproductive labor", in *Gender & Society* (2000, Vol. 14, No. 4), pp. 560-581; p. 562.

²⁰ ILO: *ILO's Work in Progress: Domestic workers organize – but can they bargain?* (Geneva, 2015), p. 2.

²¹ ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 52; L. Brewer: *Enhancing youth employability: What? Why? And How? Guide to core work skills* (Geneva, ILO, 2013), p. 6.

²² Ibid.

Regional Model Competency Standards: Domestic Work²³

- Designed to be used as a basis for developing national standards and as a regional reference point.
- Developed as a basis for identifying skills needed in the workplace, so that training and assessment resources can be developed and individuals tested against the standards.
- Covers six Functional Areas:
 - A. Core competencies:
 - A1. Communicate effectively in a domestic work environment;
 - A2. Work in a socially and culturally diverse workplace;
 - A3. Maintain health, safety and security in a domestic work environment;
 - A4. Plan, organize and manage own work;
 - A5. Undertake calculations relevant to domestic work; and
 - A6. Use a language other than the local language to communicate in a domestic work setting.
 - B. Domestic cleaning and basic housekeeping:
 - B1. Apply basic cleaning principles to perform cleaning tasks;
 - B2. Clean and maintain bedrooms and living areas;
 - B3. Clean and maintain bathrooms and toilet facilities;
 - B4. Wash cloths, linens and fabrics; and
 - B5. Iron and store laundered items.
 - C. Cooking and food handling:
 - C1. Clean and maintain food preparation, storage and service areas;
 - C2. Follow basic food safety practices;
 - C3. Organize and prepare basic food in a domestic setting; and
 - C4. Serve food and beverages.
 - D. Care for infants and children:
 - D1. Work effectively with families to provide care and support for infants and children;
 - D2. Provide care and support for the infants and/or toddlers in a household; and
 - D3. Provide care and support for children in a household.
 - E. Care for elderly people:
 - E1. Provide support to elderly people to meet personal care needs; and
 - E2. Assist client with medication.
 - F. Care for household pets and plants:
 - F1. Provide care for pets in a household; and
 - F2. Provide care for plants in a household.
- Provides breakdown for each sub-unit including performance criteria, critical skills, essential knowledge and how to demonstrate competency, a note on the resources that must be available and assessment information.

²³ The Regional Model Competency Standards for Domestic Work was presented for validation at a workshop in Manila in November 2013. The final version of the Standards benefits from the contribution of delegates from Bangladesh, Hong Kong (China), Cambodia, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, representing various sectors, including government, trade unions, employers' organizations, training institutions, and non-governmental organizations. ILO: *Regional Model Competency Standards Series: Domestic Work* (Bangkok, 2014).

many people with skills that do not match job requirements and current needs. These two challenges are compounded by gender inequality, with women being considered as having lower levels of appropriate skills than men across all sectors.²⁴ Improving education and skills development systems to better serve women will require substantive investment in programmes at the national level that ensure that men and women have equitable access to fundamental literacy and numeracy, and that detrimental attitudes and behaviours that prevent equal access to education, are addressed and challenged.²⁵ Such programmes will have to make specific efforts to reach out to women, to ensure that women are able to access and benefit from them. The experience of the education sector, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and regular migration programmes that include schemes for skills development, shows that specific attention must be paid to women to ensure they first are aware of and access these opportunities, but also are supported to complete them.²⁶

What are the barriers to women gaining accredited skills?

A low level of education is one barrier to accessing skilled labour opportunities. Across ASEAN, literacy rates for women are lower than for men, which is partly a reflection of the difference in access to primary education.²⁷ Girls are less likely to stay in school when they are considered more useful working in the home or for the family business, or are required to care for their families where a mother has migrated to work overseas. Girls may also be withdrawn from education for cultural reasons such as early marriage or puberty. Research in Cambodia has indicated that less educated women

migrate overseas and work in low paid and low skilled sectors.²⁸ Out of the countries that send the most migrant workers, literacy rates are lowest in Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic;²⁹ and Myanmar spends the least on education in ASEAN – less than 1 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) as opposed to the average of 3 per cent.³⁰ There is a link between education provided in the country of origin and the ability of migrants from that country to access decent work elsewhere, and a clear correlation between women's low education rates and low paid migrant work. Conversely, a study of Indonesian domestic workers in ASEAN found the workers had five to ten years of formal schooling – higher than the national average.³¹ This is consistent with a shift in the profile of Indonesian domestic workers, with the government playing a more active role in quality assurance and ensuring access to formal migration.³²

After primary education it is necessary to have girls enter and stay in secondary education and/or vocational education and training. Whilst women's share of TVET enrolment in ASEAN is around 50 per cent,³³ those women who enter vocational education and training do not often have access to options free from gender-based discrimination and stereotyping (for example, training limited to 'women's skills' such as hairdressing or sewing), limiting their decent work prospects.³⁴

Tertiary education is limited in ASEAN; with the highest enrolment rate in the region at 51.4 per cent in Thailand and the lowest at 13.8 per cent in Myanmar.³⁵ Poor quality education and skills training perpetuate the mismatches between the needs (and expectations) of employers and the skills and educational achievements of the labour force. In a 2013 ILO survey of ASEAN enterprises and business associations, the difficulties facing young women and men as a result of skills gaps and mismatches was confirmed. The survey identified that the training most widely needed was in management and leadership, customer service, and communication/languages.³⁶ Problem solving and critical thinking are crucial to these areas. The economic shifts associated with ASEAN economic integration could provide new opportunities especially for youth in the region, but to take advantage of this, initiatives to improve the coverage, quality and industry alignment of TVET, and equal opportunities for access by men and women, will be needed.³⁷

For those students that do access tertiary education in countries of origin, very few enter engineering, manufacturing or construction related courses key to the skills base required for growing sectors.³⁸ Critically, as these sectors are commonly considered to be male, cultural and gender norms often preclude women from accessing (or being encouraged to access) educational and training

²⁴ ADB and ILO: *Women and labour markets in Asia: Rebalancing for gender equality* (Bangkok, 2011), p. 43.

²⁵ ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 54.

²⁶ In 2013, for example, the number of women accepted into the Republic of Korea's Employment Permit System was 1,889, making up just 21 per cent of the total 8,820 Cambodians who obtained work under this system. See, Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training: *Labour Migration Policy* (Phnom Penh, 2014), p. 18.

²⁷ ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 54.

²⁸ Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Planning: *Cambodian Rural Urban Migration Project* (Phnom Penh, 2012).

²⁹ ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 54.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³¹ United Nations Capital Development Fund: *Women on the move: Harnessing the economic force of cross-border mobility in ASEAN* (Bangkok, 2015), p. 9.

³² ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 88.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³⁴ ILO: *ASEAN Economic Community 2015: Enhancing competitiveness and employability through skill development* (Bangkok, 2015), p. 16.

³⁵ ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 54.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³⁷ ILO: *ASEAN Economic Community 2015: Enhancing competitiveness and employability through skill development* (Bangkok, 2015), p. 29.

³⁸ 9.3 per cent in Brunei Darussalam, 15.6 per cent in Thailand and 27.3 per cent in Malaysia, with these figures being significantly lower for women. See, ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 57.

opportunities in these fields, further entrenching gender imbalances.

A move towards skills standardization and recognition systems

In 2010, ASEAN leaders committed to promote regional cooperation in the development of programs for skills development of vulnerable groups including women.³⁹ Vocational education and training in sending countries can be strengthened through the establishment of skills standards and recognition systems. This would involve skills components being assessed through a standard or regional model, so that they are certifiable regardless of how and where they are acquired.⁴⁰ This could be of particular use to women commonly considered to be unskilled, but may have skills that have been developed informally and could provide new work opportunities if recognized. Strengthening TVET will require increased investment in infrastructure and also a greater understanding of its value as an alternative to university education.

Currently national qualifications frameworks in ASEAN have considerable gaps, especially amongst the key countries of origin, Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar. Malaysia and Singapore are starting to link training frameworks with national development strategies, and across ASEAN there is progress towards establishing the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) that would provide the ability for qualifications to be compared across Member States.

Mutual Recognition of Skills (MRS) systems are being implemented to assist ASEAN Member States in preparing themselves for a region with free flow of skilled labour. In addition, ASEAN Member States are being supported in the development Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs). MRAs provide recognition of standards but do not constitute an agreement by either country to accept these standards. To date MRAs have been completed in eight professional occupations including engineering, nursing, architectural services, surveying, medical practitioners, dental

practitioners, accountancy and tourism.

There are no MRAs for sectors where the workforce is significantly comprised of migrant workers, including garment work, domestic work, construction, fishing and agriculture. The agreements covering these lower skilled sectors are commonly made through Memorandums of Understanding or bilateral agreements, and deal with minimum standards of employment and prevention of exploitation.

Systems that promote the recognition of skills, with supporting agreements at regional or bilateral levels, could stimulate growth in migrant-reliant sectors (like construction and tourism) while concurrently supporting the protection of more vulnerable workers, through empowerment of workers with increased knowledge.

Why consider gender in skills development programmes?

As workers become more skilled, they are able to access higher wages and greater opportunities. This has the effect of widening the wage gap between skilled and unskilled workers in the region.⁴¹ If women continue to have less access to education, skills training and the labour sectors that recognize and provide skills, there is a strong likelihood that women will be increasingly left to work in unskilled, low wage and unprotected work and these sectors will become further feminized.⁴² This will detrimentally impact the progress toward gender equality. With ASEAN Member States committed to equitable economic development and inclusive growth, it is critical to mitigate this risk. In 2013 the ASEAN Secretariat stated that "gender equality should be central in achieving the ASEAN Community".⁴³

The economic development benefits that result from increased remittances will not be felt in developing countries if women migrant workers are unable to access skills development and better paid positions.⁴⁴ Small amounts of remittances resulting from low skilled and low paid work are often considered as additional household income and used for daily expenses rather than investable capital. These types of remittances are therefore less likely to have a significant impact on economic growth or development.⁴⁵ In addition, at the national level, a higher skilled workforce can positively impact on foreign direct investment, benefiting economic growth.⁴⁶ Skills must be recognized across borders to enable migrant workers to effectively transfer these skills into decent work opportunities on returning home. Alongside gaining and transferring skills, migrants also remit knowledge, ideas and information that can boost social development and promote human rights and

³⁹ ASEAN: 2010 ASEAN Leaders' Statement on Human Resource and Skills Development for Economic Recovery and Sustainable Growth, 17th ASEAN Summit, Ha Noi, 28 Oct. 2010.

⁴⁰ ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 56.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁴² ILO: *ASEAN Economic Community 2015: Enhancing competitiveness and employability through skill development* (Bangkok, 2015), p. 28.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 95.

⁴⁵ A. Petrozziello: *Gender on the move: Working on the migration-development nexus from a gender perspective* (Santo Domingo, UN Women, 2013), p. 89.

⁴⁶ ILO and ADB: *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing integration for better jobs and shared prosperity* (Bangkok, 2014), p. 51.

gender equality.⁴⁷ Increasing the association between migration for work and skills building will contribute to establishing a more positive image of women migrant workers in countries of origin.

Low skilled labour is commonly managed on a temporary and cyclical basis, not least because it is so often irregular and informal work. In the case of cyclical migration where women are unable to migrate with their families, there is increasing understanding of the social costs of leaving family and children behind. By increasing skills and being able to access decent work options, women will improve their chances of either securing employment at home, or taking their families with them when they migrate, which can address some social challenges associated with transnational families.

There is also a clear link between providing access to skills development and reducing exploitation. Access to decent work is improved when women have access to training and skills development and are therefore better able to make informed choices. When restricted to accepting whatever employment is available, women lose the ability to negotiate and navigate exploitative risks. Providing women migrant workers with official recognition of their skills will increase their ability to negotiate their salaries and conditions of their work.

⁴⁷ UN Women: *Contributions of migrant domestic workers to sustainable development* (Bangkok, 2013).

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ILO-UN Women collaboration: 'Preventing the exploitation of women migrant workers in ASEAN'

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