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Trends in gender roles and social norms in Southeast Asia

Social norms are key determinants of gender equality. This chapter provides an overview of the latest trends across Southeast Asia in different social norms that are crucial to women's rights and empowerment. Comparing data from 2014 and 2022, the chapter reveals how attitudes towards gender equality and gender roles have become more restrictive over time at the regional level. Additional analysis at the national level provides further information on country-specific trends. Finally, the chapter provides concrete policy recommendations to transform discriminatory social norms into more gender-equitable ones, along with efforts to prevent a further backlash against gender equality and women's rights.

In Brief

Between 2014 and 2022, social norms governing gender roles and responsibilities became more restrictive in Southeast Asia

Attitudes upholding traditional gender roles and undermining women's rights worsened in Southeast Asia over the period 2014-22.

- Negative trends regarding attitudes towards women's educational and economic rights have been particularly strong. Between 2014 and 2022, the share of the population declaring that university education is more important for boys than girls increased by 15 percentage points. Over the same period, the share of the population thinking that men should have priority for jobs when employment is scarce increased by 12 percentage points.
- Social acceptance of violence against women has gained ground over time. In 2014, 24% of Southeast Asia's population declared that it is always or sometimes justifiable for a man to beat his wife. In 2022, this share had increased to 38%.
- Limited improvements occurred regarding both attitudes towards women's right to abortion and the belief that being a housewife is as fulfilling as working for pay. However, discriminatory views remained pervasive in 2022: 87% of the region's population agreed that abortion is not justifiable, and 69% believed that being a housewife is as fulfilling as working for pay.

Regional trends conceal country-specific and, sometimes, opposing trajectories.

- Attitudes towards women's roles as mothers and housewives have become less discriminatory over time in Indonesia, Singapore and Viet Nam but have worsened in Malaysia. In 2022, the population's support for the view that children suffer when their mother works for pay varied substantially across countries – ranging from 11% in Indonesia to 78% in Viet Nam.
- Attitudes towards women's educational and economic empowerment have stagnated or worsened in most countries. Attitudes towards women's political empowerment have also worsened in Indonesia. Conversely, changes have been positive in Singapore and Malaysia.
- Attitudes justifying men's use of physical violence against their spouses have worsened in all countries over time, except for Singapore. In 2022, the share of the population declaring that it is justifiable for a man to beat his wife ranged from 15% in Singapore to 60% in Viet Nam.
- The population's views on abortion have remained equally discriminatory in most Southeast Asian countries. Improvements occurred in Malaysia and Viet Nam, where the share of the population thinking that abortion is not justifiable declined by 20 and 30 percentage points, respectively.

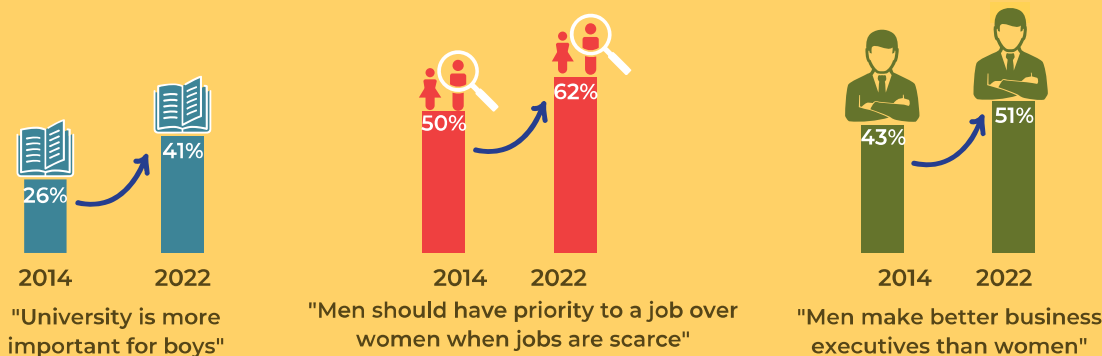
Transforming social norms relies as much on individuals' changing beliefs and behaviours as on their perceptions of the dominant views within their environment – be it family, neighbourhood, community or country.

- To turn the tide by addressing rampant discrimination in social norms and expectations around gender roles and behaviours requires engaging with all actors of society.
- Actions should focus on educating individuals and communicating effectively on the benefits of gender equality for all; collaborating closely with grassroots movements and community leaders; engaging with men and boys; and investing in data to better measure social norms over time.

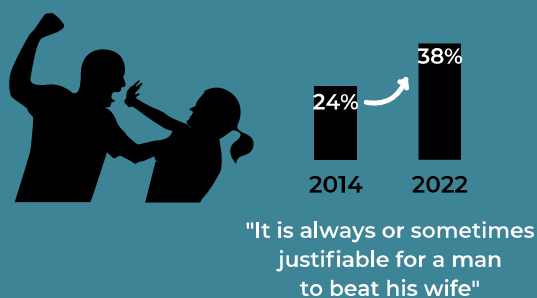
Infographic 3.1. Between 2014 and 2022, social norms governing gender roles and responsibilities became more restrictive in Southeast Asia



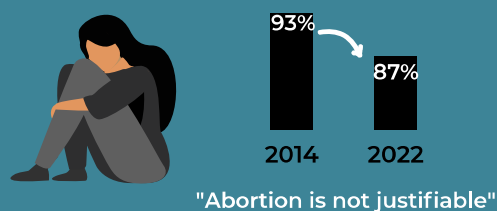
Attitudes towards women's economic rights have worsened



Social acceptance of violence against women has worsened



Opinions about abortion have improved but remain restrictive



Social norms in Southeast Asia,¹ deeply rooted in traditional gender roles, cast long shadows on the path towards gender equality and women’s empowerment. As most of the region’s societies follow patriarchal power structures, existing gender norms, including norms of masculinities, tend to restrict women’s rights and opportunities (Box 3.1). A significant share of the population sustains those norms, which restrict women’s agency and rights and reinforce restrictive masculinities. The prevalence of such entrenched beliefs poses challenges to achieving gender equality and inclusive growth. For instance, while legal frameworks are crucial for establishing the *de jure* status quo (see Chapter 2), deeply ingrained norms can impede their effective enforcement. Consequently, transforming discriminatory norms and attitudes is pivotal to establishing a more gender-egalitarian *de facto* reality and to allowing women to pursue paid activities or education.

Box 3.1. How do norms of masculinities affect gender equality?

Masculinities are social constructs that are both shaped by and part of social institutions – formal and informal laws, social norms and practices. They relate to perceived notions, shared by both men and women, about how men behave and how they should behave in order to be considered “real” men.

Masculinities are diverse, and they differ within and across cultures, geographical locations and time periods. They are informed by factors such as age, socio-economic background, race and religion. They also develop and operate at various levels, including the interpersonal, communal, institutional and societal levels.

Masculinities affect the lives of both men and women. While some masculinities promote women’s empowerment and gender equality, others encourage men to develop beliefs, behaviours and attributes which undermine women’s rights. In this regard, in 2021, the OECD Development Centre developed the following terminology:

- “Gender-equitable masculinities” describe masculinities that support women’s empowerment and gender equality and that undermine patriarchal structures and unequal gender power dynamics (OECD, 2021_[1]).
- “Restrictive masculinities” refer to masculinities that confine men to their traditional role as the dominant gender group, undermining women’s empowerment and gender equality (OECD, 2021_[1]).

Although masculinities evolve over time and space, the OECD Development Centre also identified ten restrictive norms that tend to be common across cultures and can affect women’s empowerment and rights (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1. The OECD Development Centre defines ten overarching norms of restrictive masculinities

Restrictive masculinities in the family sphere dictate that "real" men should ...	Restrictive masculinities in the public sphere dictate that "real" men should ...
not do unpaid care and domestic work	be the breadwinner
have the final say in household decisions	be financially dominant
control household assets	work in “manly” jobs
protect and exercise guardianship of women in the household	be the “ideal worker”
dominate sexual and reproductive choices	be a “manly” leader

Source: (OECD, 2021_[1]), *Man Enough? Measuring Masculine Norms to Promote Women’s Empowerment*, Social Institutions and Gender Index, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/6ffd1936-en>.

Social norms are not gender-neutral. Through education and socialisation processes, individuals are exposed to social norms, often from a very young age. Throughout life, people internalise prevalent social norms and adhere to them; not doing so can trigger social sanctions or stigmatisation. In this regard, social norms reflect shared societal beliefs on how individuals should be and behave, which often differ for women and men. For instance, 56% of the global population believe that children suffer when their mothers work for pay. When such attitudes are upheld by the majority, they can translate into rigid social norms that anchor women into a primary role as caregivers and, in contrast, establish men as breadwinners.

Change in social norms is far from linear, and crises can exacerbate restrictive gender norms. Changing the status quo requires finding new societal agreements on what it means to be a “real” woman or a “real” man. The dominant gender can perceive changes as a direct threat to its established position and rights, which can lead to a backlash against more gender-equitable norms and rules, particularly during crises. For instance, evidence reveals that during economic crises men tend to experience increased levels of stress, anxiety or depression as it becomes more difficult for them to fulfil their social role as breadwinners (Reeves and Stuckler, 2015^[2]). When men sense a threat to their masculinity or dominance, it can lead to a reinforcement of restrictive gender norms. Under such circumstances, women can face heightened risks of experiencing gender-based violence: some men may resort to violence to re-establish their dominant role within the family (OECD, 2023^[3]).

Yet, crises can also provide an opportunity for change. They can allow policy makers to design and implement policies and response mechanisms that are gender transformative, integrate both women’s and men’s needs and concerns, and promote lasting changes.

The transformation of restrictive social norms is two-pronged, relying equally on individuals’ adopting more gender-egalitarian attitudes and behaviours and on their perceptions of the dominant views within their environment – be it family, neighbourhood, community or country. Individuals can change their own beliefs, inducing a shift towards greater gender equality. However, the transformation of norms also hinges on individuals’ perceptions of the prevailing and dominant norms. Transforming restrictive social norms thus depends not only on changes at the individual level but also on a more accurate measurement and understanding of the dominant views held by a person’s larger environment.

Evidence from 60 countries reveals important misperceptions regarding the populations’ support for gender equality (Bursztyn et al., 2023^[4]). In many places, individuals’ support for certain rights, such as women’s economic rights, differs from what individuals perceive as the actual level of support in their countries. The gap is partly attributed to people’s inclination to exaggerate the views of the minority – whether it holds discriminatory beliefs or gender-egalitarian ones. Additionally, gender stereotypes play a role, as individuals tend to underestimate men’s support for gender equality while overestimating women’s support. This bias could be explained by stereotypical assumptions that all women favour gender equality while all men oppose it – stereotypes often reinforced by mass media (Bursztyn et al., 2023^[4]).

Recent trends in Southeast Asia are disconcerting. Data from 2014 and 2022 reveal that, on average, social norms reinforcing patriarchal gender roles and responsibilities gained support across Southeast Asia. The chapter explores these trends at the regional and country levels. It concludes by providing policy recommendations aimed at establishing an effective transformative approach.

Recent trends suggest a reinforcement of traditional gender roles in Southeast Asia

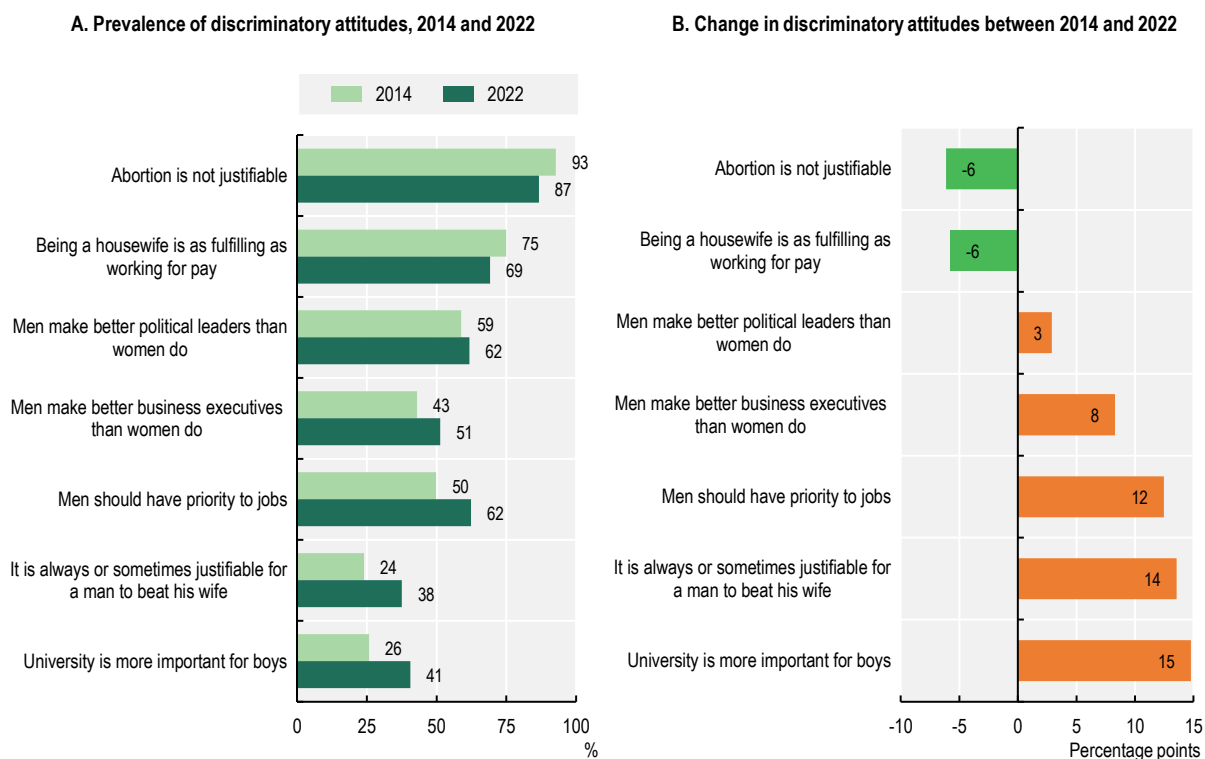
Between 2014 and 2022, social norms that reinforce patriarchal gender roles and responsibilities gained support across Southeast Asia. Despite some localised improvements at the country level, a large share of individuals, regardless of their age, continues to hold gender biases and endorse attitudes that discriminate against women’s rights and capabilities across all spheres of life. These discriminatory views

and beliefs affect women daily in the family, economic and political spheres. The impacts on women's rights and opportunities span the entire course of their lifetimes.

Attitudes towards women's educational and economic rights have taken a disheartening turn over the last decade. The most concerning development pertains to the perceived importance of university education for girls and boys. In 2014, 26% of the region's population believed tertiary education was more important for boys; by 2022, this figure had surged to 41% (Figure 3.1). If sustained over time, such trends may severely jeopardise women's and girls' ability to enrol in higher education, with drastic consequences on their future economic empowerment. Over the same period, attitudes restricting women's economic inclusion and opportunities also worsened. Notably, more people believe that men make better business executives and should have priority when jobs are scarce (Figure 3.1). The share of the population declaring that men should have more right to a job than women when jobs are scarce increased from 50% to 62% between 2014 and 2022. Overall, these trends collectively underscore a reinforcement of traditional gender norms, positioning men as the primary breadwinners while confining women to caregiving and reproductive roles.

Figure 3.1. Discrimination in social norms in Southeast Asia increased between 2014 and 2022

Prevalence of discriminatory attitudes in 2014 and 2022 (Panel A) and magnitude of change in discriminatory attitudes between 2014 and 2022 (Panel B)



Note: Southeast Asia's averages are based on six countries covering 89% of the region's population. These countries have data available for consecutive waves 5 or 6 and wave 7 of the World Values Survey (WVS). Countries included are Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam. Data are not available for Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Timor-Leste. Data from 2022 correspond to wave 7 of WVS (2017-2022), and data from 2014 correspond to wave 6 of WVS (2010-2014). For Indonesia and Viet Nam, 2014 data are from wave 5 of WVS (2005-2009) because data on selected statements were not collected in wave 6.

Source: (Inglehart et al., 2022^[5]), "World Values Survey: All Rounds – Country-Pooled Datafile Version 3.0", *World Values Survey*, JD Systems Institute and WWSA Secretariat, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp>.

At the same time, some improvements have occurred, but they remain small and limited to views where absolute levels of discrimination are highest. Between 2014 and 2022, slightly fewer people thought that being a housewife is as fulfilling as working for pay, with the share dropping by 6 percentage points, from 75% to 69% (Figure 3.1). The proportion of the population opposing abortion also slightly decreased by 6 percentage points. However, restrictive views on women's reproductive rights remain widespread. On average in 2022, nine out of ten people believed that abortion is not justifiable. The potential impacts on women's and girls' health are far-reaching. Restrictions on access to safe and legal abortion, including the social sanctions associated with it, not only undermine their reproductive autonomy but also bear important health risks (see Chapter 1).

More people tolerate intimate-partner violence, exacerbating the risks for women's physical integrity. Between 2014 and 2022, the share of the Southeast Asian population declaring that it is justifiable for a man to beat his wife increased by 14 percentage points, from 24% to 38% (Figure 3.1). This trend is extremely worrying, notably because evidence suggests that more women experience intimate-partner violence in countries where its social acceptance is higher (OECD, 2023^[6]). These views are held by men and women, although to a lesser extent by women. The gender gap, however, does not exceed 10 percentage points across countries with available data.² This reflects how women themselves – consciously or not – uphold views that could eventually increase their risk of experiencing violence.

Contrary to recent trends of increasing gender-based discriminatory views among young adults in advanced economies such as France or the United Kingdom (Government of France, 2024^[7]; King's College London and Ipsos, 2024^[8]), discrepancies across generations in terms of discriminatory attitudes remain limited in Southeast Asia. In 2022, similar shares of youth (individuals aged 15 to 35 years) and older individuals (aged over 35 years) hold restrictive views across the different statements analysed. However, there are notable exceptions, including perceptions that university is more important for boys than for girls and that men make better business executives. In 2022, fewer youth held discriminatory views that undermining girls' and women's economic empowerment compared to older individuals.³ Between 2014 and 2022, changes in the shares of youth or older individuals holding discriminatory views have largely moved in the same direction and magnitude.⁴

Changes in social norms vary across Southeast Asian countries

Beyond regional trends, data reveal differences across Southeast Asian countries, in terms of both current levels of discrimination in attitudes and changes over time. This section provides a holistic overview of the current state of social norms and changes that took place between 2014 and 2022 at the country level in Southeast Asia.⁵ It first focuses on attitudes related to women's traditional roles as well as economic and political empowerment; it then analyses attitudes towards women's physical integrity and reproductive autonomy.

Attitudes towards women's empowerment and economic rights have worsened in many Southeast Asian countries

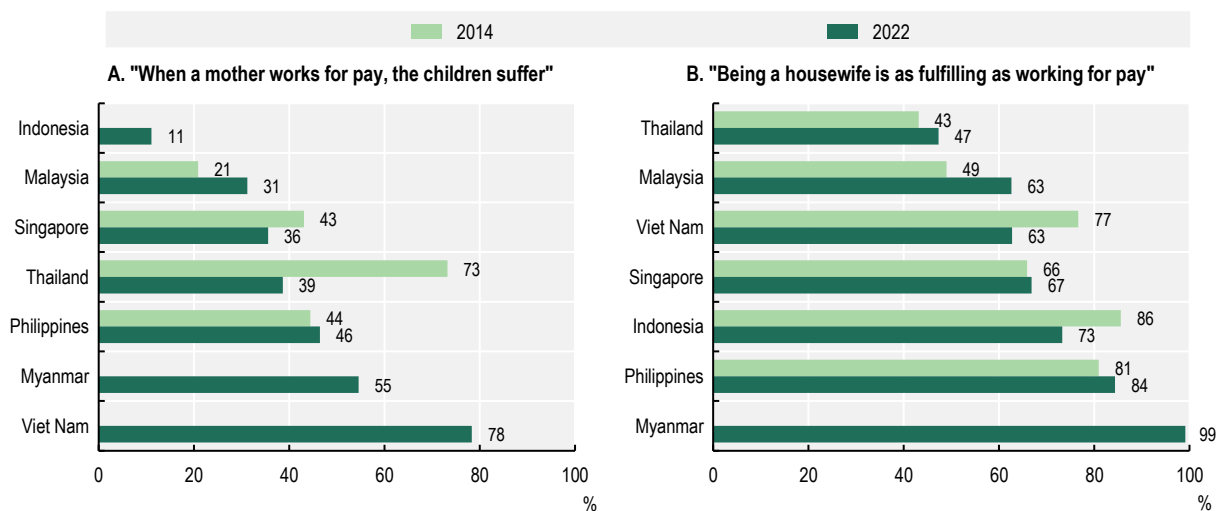
Trends at the regional level show that discriminatory attitudes related to women's and girls' educational and economic empowerment and rights gained ground between 2014 and 2022. However, country-level data reveal a more nuanced picture, both in terms of past and current levels of discriminatory attitudes. For instance, Singapore stands out as a positive example, contrasting sharply with other Southeast Asian countries where most of the selected attitudes towards women's traditional roles, economic empowerment and decision-making power have worsened over time.

Attitudes towards women's roles as mothers and housewives

Social norms that tie women's identity and status to that of mothers and housewives remain widespread in most Southeast Asian countries. As in many parts of the world, discriminatory attitudes uphold these rigid gender norms (OECD, 2023^[6]). In 2022, based on countries for which data are available, 35% of the Southeast Asian population believed that when mothers work for pay, their children suffer. Shares range from 11% in Indonesia to approximately half of the population in Myanmar and the Philippines and reaching 78% in Viet Nam (Figure 3.2, Panel A). Moreover, in 2022, about 70% of the region's population considered that being a housewife is as fulfilling as working for pay. Variations across countries are smaller, ranging from 47% in Thailand to 84% in the Philippines (Figure 3.2, Panel B).

Figure 3.2. Southeast Asian women's roles remain primarily those of mothers and carers rather than breadwinners

Share of the population agreeing with the statement "When a mother works for pay, the children suffer" (Panel A) and with the statement "Being a housewife is as fulfilling as working for pay" (Panel B), 2014 and 2022



Note: 2022 data are from wave 7 of the World Values Survey (WVS) (2017-2022); 2014 data are from wave 6 of WVS (2010-2014). In Panel B, 2014 data for Indonesia and Viet Nam are from wave 5 of WVS (2005-2009) because data on selected attitudes were not collected in wave 6. For countries that only have 2022 data, data were not collected in previous WVS waves.

Source: (Inglehart et al., 2022^[5]), "World Values Survey: All Rounds – Country-Pooled Datafile Version 3.0", *World Values Survey*, JD Systems Institute and WWSA Secretariat, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp>.

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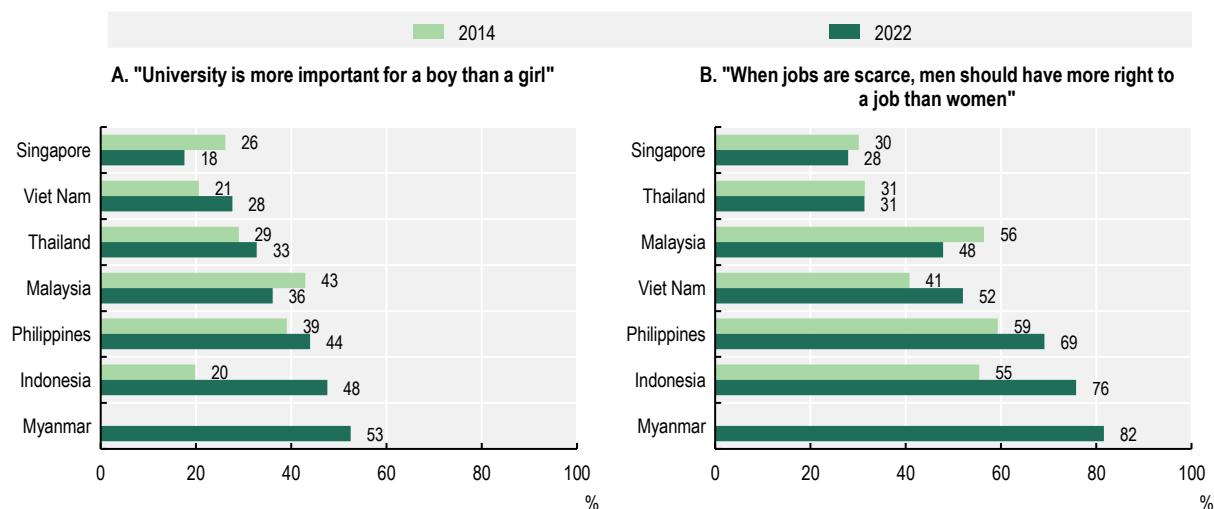
Over time, opposing trends have emerged in the region. In Thailand, the share of the population declaring that children suffer when mothers engage in paid work sharply dropped by 34 percentage points between 2014 and 2022, from 73% to 39% (Figure 3.2, Panel A). Likewise, the proportion of the population holding these views decreased over time in Singapore and remained stable in the Philippines. Conversely, it increased by 10 percentage points in Malaysia. The share of Malaysia's population agreeing that being a housewife is as fulfilling as working for pay increased to a similar extent between 2014 and 2022, whereas it dropped significantly in Indonesia and Viet Nam (Figure 3.2, Panel B).

Attitudes towards the importance of education and towards job priority for men

Women's and girls' opportunities and empowerment are crucially determined by attitudes supporting their access to higher education and their right to employment. Although in 2022 41% of the Southeast Asian population believed that university is more important for boys than girls, important discrepancies existed at the country level. Less than one-fifth of Singaporeans held these views compared to around half of the population in Indonesia and Myanmar (Figure 3.3, Panel A). By curtailing the private or public support that girls receive to pursue higher education, these attitudes can severely restrict women's and girls' future professional opportunities from the onset. Moreover, when such views gain ground among the population, they can become the norm, locking women in a long-term status where tertiary education remains inaccessible to them. Similarly, attitudes that justify giving men priority for jobs can hamper women's economic empowerment. In 2022, more than 70% of the population in Indonesia, Myanmar and the Philippines believed that when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women (Figure 3.3, Panel B).


Figure 3.3. Discriminatory views on women's educational and economic rights have gained ground in Southeast Asian countries

Share of the population agreeing with the statement "University is more important for a boy than a girl" (Panel A) and with the statement "When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women" (Panel B), 2014 and 2022



Note: 2022 data are from wave 7 of the World Values Survey (WVS) (2017-2022); 2014 data are from wave 6 of WVS (2010-2014). For Indonesia and Viet Nam, 2014 data are from wave 5 of WVS (2005-2009) because data on selected attitudes were not collected in wave 6. In Myanmar, data are only available for wave 7 of WVS because the country was not covered by previous waves.

Source: (Inglehart et al., 2022^[5]), "World Values Survey: All Rounds – Country-Pooled Datafile Version 3.0", *World Values Survey*, JD Systems Institute and WWSA Secretariat, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp>.

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In most Southeast Asian countries, these attitudes have become more discriminatory over time. The most significant increases occurred in Indonesia – with, between 2014 and 2022, a change of 20 percentage points in attitudes justifying job priority for men and 28 percentage points in attitudes perceiving tertiary education as more important for boys. Conversely, Malaysia and Singapore are the only countries where fewer people think that men should have priority for jobs and that university is more important for boys than for girls. Within the region's countries, attitudes towards these two statements evolved in the same direction

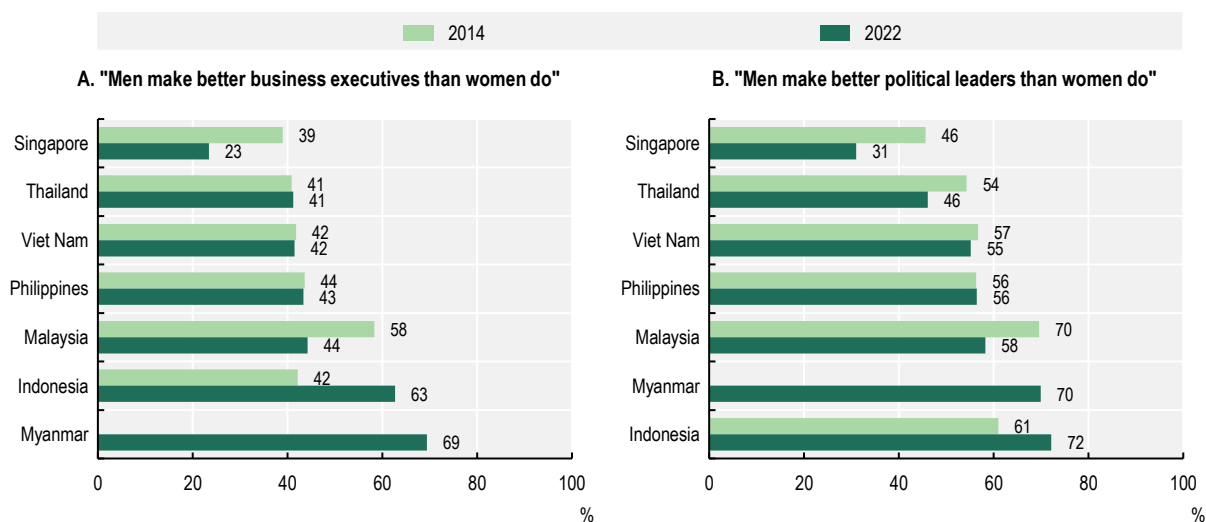
between 2014 and 2022 – either worsening or improving in both statements. These parallel trends reflect the strong interlinkages between both statements, underscoring the role of educational opportunities as a prerequisite for economic empowerment (Figure 3.3).

Attitudes towards women's ability to be decision makers in the economic or political sphere

Attitudes questioning women's ability to be decision-makers in the economic or political sphere are widely shared across the region. In 2022, over 50% of Southeast Asia's population declared that men make better business executives than women, and over 60% believed that men make better political leaders. At the country level, variations are limited, although these discriminatory views are lowest in Singapore and highest in Indonesia and Myanmar (Figure 3.4). Such attitudes have a direct impact on women's ability to be decision-makers in practice. For instance, gender stereotypes and sexism are cited among the main reasons explaining women's low representation in Southeast Asia's national parliaments (Welsh, 2020^[9]; Sinpeng and Savirani, 2022^[10]). Overall, they severely curtail women's agency and their ability to participate in the design and implementation of policies (see Chapter 1).

Figure 3.4. Levels of discrimination towards women's leadership competencies have stagnated in most Southeast Asian countries

Share of the population agreeing with the statement "Men make better business executives than women do" (Panel A) and with the statement "Men make better political leaders than women do" (Panel B), 2014 and 2022



Note: 2022 data are from wave 7 of the World Values Survey (WVS) (2017-2022); 2014 data are from wave 6 of WVS (2010-2014). For Indonesia and Viet Nam, 2014 data are from wave 5 of WVS (2005-2009) because data on selected attitudes were not collected in wave 6. In Myanmar, data are only available for wave 7 of WVS because the country was not covered by previous waves.

Source: (Inglehart et al., 2022^[5]), "World Values Survey: All Rounds – Country-Pooled Datafile Version 3.0", *World Values Survey*, JD Systems Institute and WWSA Secretariat, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp>.

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Regional trends conceal a more nuanced situation where the overall worsening is, in fact, a country trend. Although the proportion of Southeast Asians who declared that men make better business or political leaders increased between 2014 and 2022 (Figure 3.1), country-level data show that support for these discriminatory views decreased or stagnated in all Southeast Asian countries but Indonesia. Because Indonesia accounts for 40% of Southeast Asia's population, worsening attitudes among Indonesians offset the progress that occurred in the remaining countries of the region. In this context, data notably show that

attitudes undermining women's leadership abilities dropped substantially in Malaysia and Singapore (for both economic and political statements), as well as Thailand (for the political statement only) (Figure 3.4).

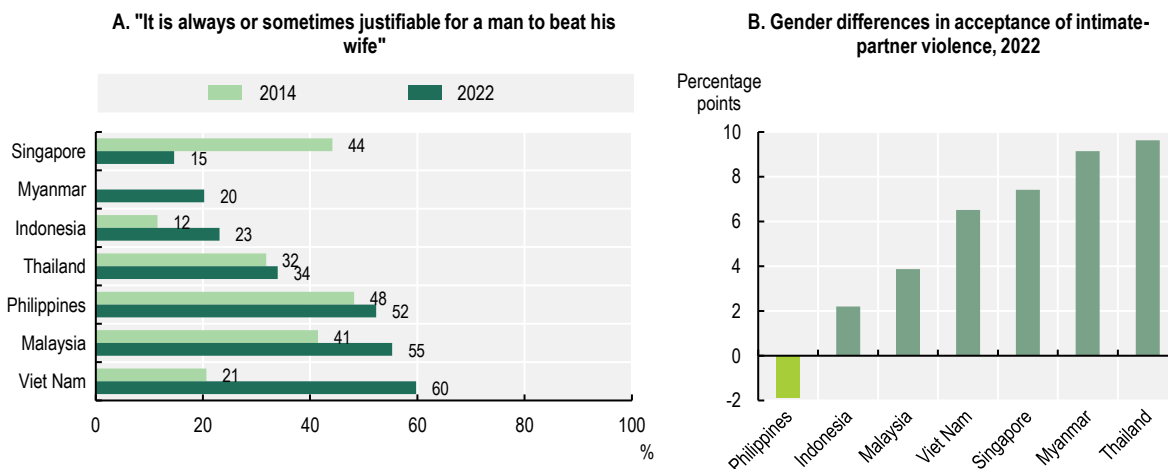
Attitudes towards women's physical integrity remain worrisome

Attitudes towards violence against women

The social acceptance of intimate-partner violence remains widespread across Southeast Asian countries. These pervasive discriminatory attitudes can severely undermine women's physical integrity and bodily autonomy (OECD, 2023^[6]). In 2022, attitudes condoning men's use of violence against their spouses ranged from 15% in Singapore to over 50% in Malaysia, the Philippines and Viet Nam (Figure 3.5, Panel A).

Figure 3.5. Both Southeast Asian women and men tolerate intimate-partner violence

Share of the population agreeing with the statement "It is always or sometimes justifiable for a man to beat his wife" (Panel A) and difference between the shares of men and women agreeing with the same statement (Panel B), 2014 and 2022



Note: 2022 data are from wave 7 of the World Values Survey (WVS) (2017-2022); 2014 data are from wave 6 of WVS (2010-2014). For Indonesia and Viet Nam, 2014 data are from wave 5 of WVS (2005-2009) because data on selected attitudes were not collected in wave 6. In Myanmar, data are only available for wave 7 of WVS because the country was not covered by previous waves. In Panel B, positive values mean that more men than women agree with the statement "It is always or sometimes justifiable for a man to beat his wife".

Source: (Inglehart et al., 2022^[5]), "World Values Survey: All Rounds – Country-Pooled Datafile Version 3.0", *World Values Survey*, JD Systems Institute and WWSA Secretariat, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp>.

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Between 2014 and 2022, these discriminatory attitudes worsened in all Southeast Asian countries except for Singapore, where social acceptance dropped significantly by nearly 30 percentage points, from 44% to 15%. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the share of the population declaring that it is justifiable for a man to beat his spouse markedly increased by 39 percentage points in Viet Nam, reaching 60% in 2022 (Figure 3.5, Panel A). These trends are consistent with findings from the second National Study on Violence Against Women in Viet Nam, conducted in 2019. The study showed that over half of Vietnamese women (52%) agree that a man has a good reason to hit his spouse under certain circumstances – such as when she does not complete housework, disobeys, refuses to have sex or asks about girlfriends, when

the man suspects her of being unfaithful or when she does not take good care of the children (MOLISA, GSO and UNFPA, 2020^[11]).

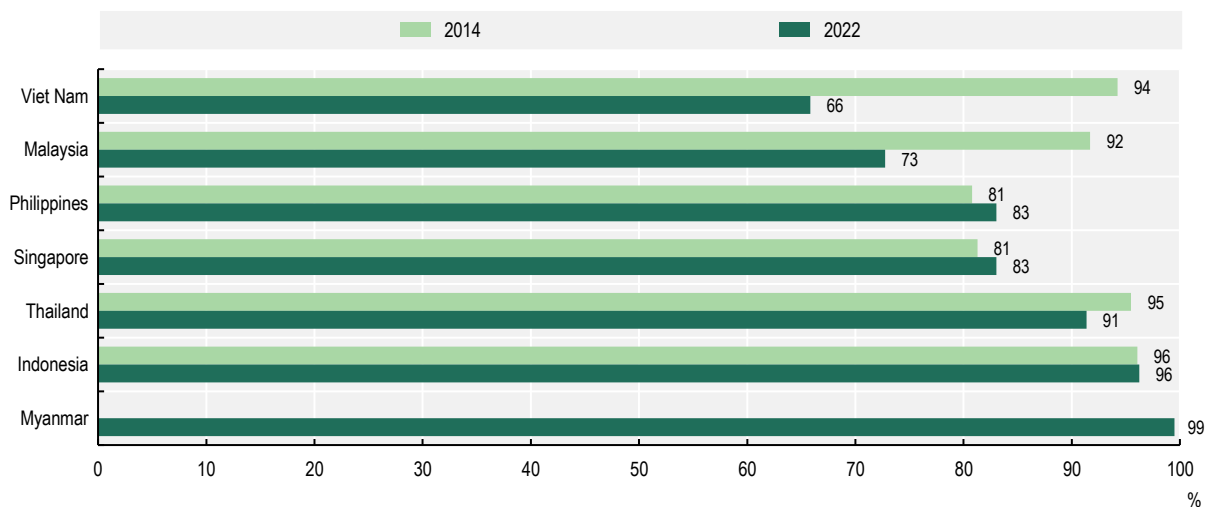
Across Southeast Asian countries, except for the Philippines, more men than women condone intimate-partner violence (Inglehart et al., 2022^[5]). Gender differences in social acceptance of such violence against women are lowest in the Philippines, followed by Indonesia, and are particularly large in Myanmar and Thailand. Nevertheless, gender differences never exceed ten percentage points, underscoring that acceptance of violence against women is ubiquitous (Figure 3.5, Panel B).

Attitudes towards abortion

In Southeast Asia, women's right to safe and legal abortion is restricted not only by legal frameworks (see Chapter 2) but also by discriminatory attitudes. The pervasive stigma surrounding abortion in the region can lead to severe health consequences for women and girls, discouraging them from seeking safe abortion services and healthcare (Sciortino, 2020^[12]). In 2022, almost nine in ten people held discriminatory attitudes towards women's reproductive rights. Although opposition is lowest in Viet Nam, followed by Malaysia, approximately 70% of these countries' population continue to find abortion unjustifiable. In Indonesia and Malaysia, the quasi-totality of the population holds such views (Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6. Discriminatory attitudes undermine women's reproductive rights in all Southeast Asian countries

Share of the population agreeing with the statement "Abortion is not justifiable", 2014 and 2022



Note: 2022 data are from wave 7 of the World Values Survey (WVS) (2017-2022); 2014 data are from wave 6 of WVS (2010-2014). For Indonesia and Viet Nam, 2014 data are from wave 5 of WVS (2005-2009) because data on selected attitudes were not collected in wave 6. In Myanmar, data are only available for wave 7 of WVS because the country was not covered by previous waves.

Source: (Inglehart et al., 2022^[5]), "World Values Survey: All Rounds – Country-Pooled Datafile Version 3.0", *World Values Survey*, JD Systems Institute and WWSA Secretariat, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp>.

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At the regional level, the share of the population opposing abortion decreased by 6 percentage points between 2014 and 2022. Progress stemmed from a sharp decline in discriminatory attitudes in Malaysia and Viet Nam, where negative attitudes towards abortion fell by almost 20 and 30 percentage points, respectively (Figure 3.6).

Changes in laws play a crucial role in granting women the right to safe and legal abortion, but their effectiveness and enforcement largely depend on societies' views. In Viet Nam, women have access to legal abortion under all circumstances whereas, in Malaysia, abortion is only permitted to save the pregnant woman's life or to preserve her health. Despite these legal variations, attitudes have improved substantially in both countries. In 2021, Thailand liberalised its abortion law, guaranteeing women the right to abortion under any circumstance during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. However, the population's view on abortion remains similar to those in Indonesia, where abortion is illegal (OECD Development Centre/OECD, 2023^[13]). These asymmetries between attitudes and laws highlight that one does not necessarily mirror the other. It underscores the importance of accompanying legal reforms with dedicated policy interventions aiming to transform corresponding social norms.

Policy recommendations

Enhancing gender equality to the benefit of all requires a societal shift in the norms and expectations that govern gender roles and behaviour and that are detrimental to the fundamental rights of women and girls. Achieving such a transformative change will take time, given the deeply entrenched nature of discriminatory norms. A whole-of-society approach is crucial due to the pervasive influence of these norms and their impact on all aspects of women's and girls' lives. Moreover, the strong patriarchal nature of Southeast Asian societies underscores the importance of engaging men and boys as key allies to address the issue of restrictive masculinities. In this regard, investing in the education of boys and girls and shaping the social views of future generations are essential, starting from early childhood. Building on the main bottlenecks identified in the chapter, this section outlines concrete policy actions that should be undertaken by Southeast Asian policy makers, in collaboration with relevant partners and stakeholders.

Educate and communicate effectively on the benefits of gender equality

- Policy makers should collaborate with educational institutions and experts to ensure that education programmes incorporate a gender lens and that all classrooms and teaching materials use gender-neutral language. Training on gender-responsive teaching methods should be made compulsory to favour an inclusive classroom environment free of gender-based discrimination, where boys and girls benefit from equal participation and learning opportunities.
- Policy makers, in close collaboration with education and gender experts, should incorporate modules on gender roles and power dynamics into age-appropriate and evidence-based comprehensive sexuality education to promote more gender-egalitarian attitudes and decision-making behaviours among youth.

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Health has developed guidelines and policies to enhance adolescents' sexual and reproductive health, including modules focusing on better engagement with adolescents, as well as guidelines for healthcare providers (Government of Malaysia, n.d.^[14]). The Ministry of Health further collaborates with other actors to design and deliver educational programmes focusing on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

- Policy makers should collaborate with civil society organisations, the education sector, the media and the entertainment industry to produce and disseminate edutainment content – a mix of education and entertainment – that promotes gender-equitable attitudes and practices in all aspects of life. Movies, television or radio shows, media campaigns, etc. that are being developed should portray different members of society in non-traditional roles in everyday life to allow viewers to identify with people who respect girls' and women's rights and to reflect upon their own behaviour and attitudes.

In the Philippines, the #inFAIRness campaign has engaged men as advocates for women's economic empowerment both online and offline. It aims to show positive actions that everyone can undertake to support gender equality, using digital channels and distributing stickers with key messages in various modes of public transportation (Government of Australia, 2018_[15]).

- Policy makers, in collaboration with the media, must sensitise the public to the benefits that gender equality would bring to all, women and men alike. Communication campaigns conveying the benefits of gender equality should be targeted to different demographic groups, from the youngest to the oldest. Ensuring that all people, particularly men, fully understand that gender equality would benefit the entire society is crucial to win over men's and boys' support and prevent a possible backlash against women's rights. In particular, influencers and male celebrities committed to the cause of gender equality can play an important advocacy role in convincing people that shifting away from traditional gender roles carries benefits for men as well, notably for their well-being and mental health.

Collaborate closely with civil society organisations and leaders on targeted interventions

- Policy makers and development partners should work closely with civil society organisations when designing policies and programmes aimed at advancing gender equality. Grassroots and feminist movements relentlessly advocate for gender equality and possess unique knowledge that stems from their direct interactions with local communities.
- Policy makers, development partners and philanthropic actors should provide funding and technical support to civil society organisations implementing projects on gender equality, women's empowerment and masculinities. Continuous support over time is crucial to ensure that local organisations can deploy and sustain their programmes over the long term and fulfil their strategic role in holding other actors accountable.
- Policy makers and development partners should specifically target their collaboration with civil society organisations to operate women-led participatory programmes. Empowering women as decision-makers is critical for women's voices and expertise to be considered. Putting the spotlight on women-led successes and favouring the emergence of role models can also help shift established norms and perceptions of women's capacities.

The Feminist Participatory Action Research programme of the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development focuses on building movements to challenge patriarchy. It connects women across geographies, ethnicities, sectors and life stages to induce structural change. For example, in Viet Nam, where climate change and disasters have adverse impacts particularly on women, participants used the programme to modify communal regulations so that at least 30% of the previously male-only Village Disaster Response Committee members must be women. As a result, female participants reported an increased sense of power and respect, as they were included in policy making and became active civic decision-makers (Gerard, 2018_[16]; APWLD, n.d._[17]).

- Policy makers should collaborate closely with key community members, i.e. religious and community leaders, as well as parents. As their opinions are well-respected and followed, these gatekeepers have a major role to play in both the success of policies and programmes that focus on promoting gender-equitable attitudes and responsibilities in the household and the eradication of harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and cutting and child marriage.

Engage with men and boys

- Civil society organisations, together with policy makers and development partners, should create safe spaces for boys and men where they can learn about gender equality and can discuss gender

roles and responsibilities without fear of judgment. This can further help by building informal networks among men committed to promoting gender-equitable masculinities.

In Malaysia, the Society for Equality, Respect And Trust for All works to dismantle long-held socially constructed gender roles and promote gender equality by engaging men and boys in partnership with women. It focuses on changing harmful gender norms and unequal power dynamics in the family by advocating for equal parenting, for example through the Celebrating Fatherhood campaign. Fathers' increased involvement in childcare can create opportunities for mothers, in terms of both personal and professional development (SERATA, 2020^[18]).

In Indonesia, the Prevention+ programme aims to increase women's economic participation and reduce violence against women by involving men as agents of change and promoting positive masculinity values based on principles of equality and non-violence. The programme operates at various levels – individual, community, institutional and governmental – and includes community-level discussions for women and men as well as adolescents, counselling, digital campaigns, and advocacy strategies from the local to the national level (Rutgers Indonesia, 2020^[19]).

- At the same time, policy makers, with the support of other relevant stakeholders, should invest in programmes that engage with men and boys to address specific gender inequalities. These programmes should notably focus on the redistribution of gender roles in the household and in public life and on the protection of women's health and well-being, particularly by gaining boys and men as allies to prevent and eliminate gender-based violence.

In Indonesia, the MenCare+ programme successfully transformed the attitudes of many men towards gender equality through workshops, counselling sessions and messaging campaigns. The programme engaged men in classes on newborn and maternal health, provided counselling to perpetrators of domestic violence, and trained men to advocate for women's sexual and reproductive rights. As a result, "31% more men reported highly equitable gender attitudes at the end of the intervention" (Apolitical, 2017^[20]).

Invest in data and measure social norms over time

- Policy makers and development partners should commit and allocate sufficient budget to collecting up-to-date, sex-disaggregated data on social norms. Resources must be sustained over the long term, as transforming social norms requires time and may not be linear. To reduce costs associated with data collection, national statistics offices and other data collectors could integrate key indicators on social and gender norms into surveys that are already conducted on a regular basis. For instance, a module on attitudes and norms on women's economic empowerment could be incorporated in labour force surveys.
- National Statistical Offices and data providers should systematically include modules on social norms related to gender roles and responsibilities in opinion surveys. This would help monitor changes over time and allow relevant stakeholders to take corrective action if needed, when designing and implementing evidence-based policies or interventions.
- Increased efforts are needed to measure both what individuals believe and what they think are the dominant views of society. Understanding and monitoring these two concepts are crucial, as any discrepancy between one and the other can open up a space where policy makers can intervene in favour of gender equality.

Notes

¹ Southeast Asia covers 11 countries: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam.

² Data are available for Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam. The gender gap in attitudes justifying men's use of violence against their spouse ranges from 2 percentage points in Indonesia to 10 percentage points in Thailand. The Philippines is the only country of the region where a greater share of women (53%) than men (51%) justify men's use of violence.

³ In Southeast Asia, in 2022: 42% of the population aged over 35 years agrees that university education is more important for a boy than a girl, compared to 35% of the population aged 15 to 35 years; 53% of the population aged over 35 years declares that men make better business executives, compared to 47% of the population aged 15 to 35 years.

⁴ Notable exceptions include views that men make better political leaders and that children suffer when their mother works. Between 2014 and 2022, the increase in perceptions that women are less capable than men of being political leaders was larger among the youth (+8 percentage points) than among older individuals (+1 percentage point). In addition, views according to which children suffer when their mother works for pay have decreased faster among older individuals (-14 percentage points) than among the youth (-2 percentage points).

⁵ This section relies on data from the World Values Survey (WVS). Data are not available for Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic or Timor-Leste. For the remaining seven Southeast Asian countries, data are available for wave 7 of WVS (2017-2022). To account for changes over time, data from 2014, which correspond to wave 6 of WVS (2010-2014), are used where available. For Indonesia and Viet Nam, data from wave 5 of WVS (2005-2009) are used, as data were not collected in wave 6.

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From:
SIGI 2024 Regional Report for Southeast Asia
Time to Care

Access the complete publication at:

<https://doi.org/10.1787/7fc15e1c-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2024), "Trends in gender roles and social norms in Southeast Asia", in *SIGI 2024 Regional Report for Southeast Asia: Time to Care*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/92ee8524-en>

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