

# WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN THE ASEAN REGION

Data Snapshot



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Gender equality and women's empowerment are central to the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) and the [Community Vision 2025 of the Association for Southeast Asian Nations \(ASEAN\)](#). They are also key to fostering a more sustainable and inclusive region. Providing women with equal access to decision-making power and leadership not only supports their well-being, but also enables their contribution towards regional progress and inclusiveness. Micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) account for a large portion of business establishments across the ASEAN region.<sup>1</sup> Many of these businesses are owned or operated by women, who are helping to shape the economy of the region and its impacts on human development, well-being and the environment.

As the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has shown, [women and men have been affected differently](#), but women have been less likely than men to contribute to the design of response and recovery policies. This is because, as statistics show, women continue to face many structural challenges that limit their equal participation in policymaking and decision-making. In the ASEAN region, there is increasing recognition of the role of women as leaders and agents of change. However, more efforts are still required to promote their roles in accelerating productivity, enhancing ecosystem conservation and creating more sustainable and inclusive development.

As ASEAN leaders come together to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, concrete steps could be taken to formulate more inclusive solutions. Placing women's participation and leadership at the heart of COVID-19 response and recovery can turn the current crisis into an opportunity to create a more resilient ASEAN community that leaves no one behind.

## ACROSS ASEAN COUNTRIES, MORE MANAGERIAL POSITIONS ARE HELD BY MEN

Women's share of managerial positions across ASEAN countries remains below parity. With the exception of the Lao People's Democratic Republic and the Philippines, women remain underrepresented in management in all countries (figure 1). The share of women managers in South-East Asia has only increased by 2 percentage points in the past two decades (39 per cent in 2000 compared to 41 per cent in 2020).<sup>2</sup> As many of the positions occupied by women are lower management jobs, women's representation in middle and senior management is even lower, at 26 per cent.<sup>3</sup> Evidence shows that the presence of women in corporate leadership roles may improve the performance of firms.<sup>4</sup> Breaking the glass ceiling is expected to enable women to gain access to higher wages and greater agency to shape decisions that have important economic, environmental and social impacts for the ASEAN region as a whole.

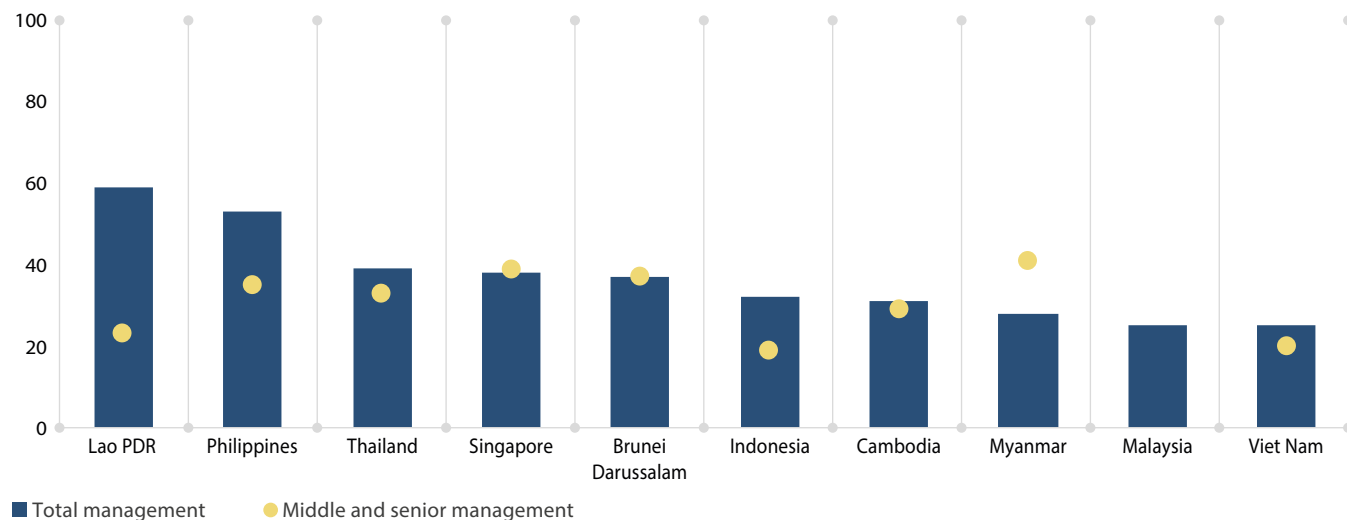
1 ILO (2015). [ASEAN Small Business Competitiveness Programme](#).

2 [Global SDG indicators database](#) (accessed August 2022). Aggregate follows the SDG regional grouping for South-eastern Asia and includes estimates for Timor-Leste.

3 Regional aggregate calculated using ILO estimates obtained from [ILOSTAT \(accessed August 2022\)](#) and population figures for women age 15+, obtained from [World Population Prospects](#). The calculation excludes Malaysia as no data were available.

4 M. Noland, T. Moran and B. Kotschwar (2016). [Is Gender Diversity Profitable? Evidence from a Global Survey](#).

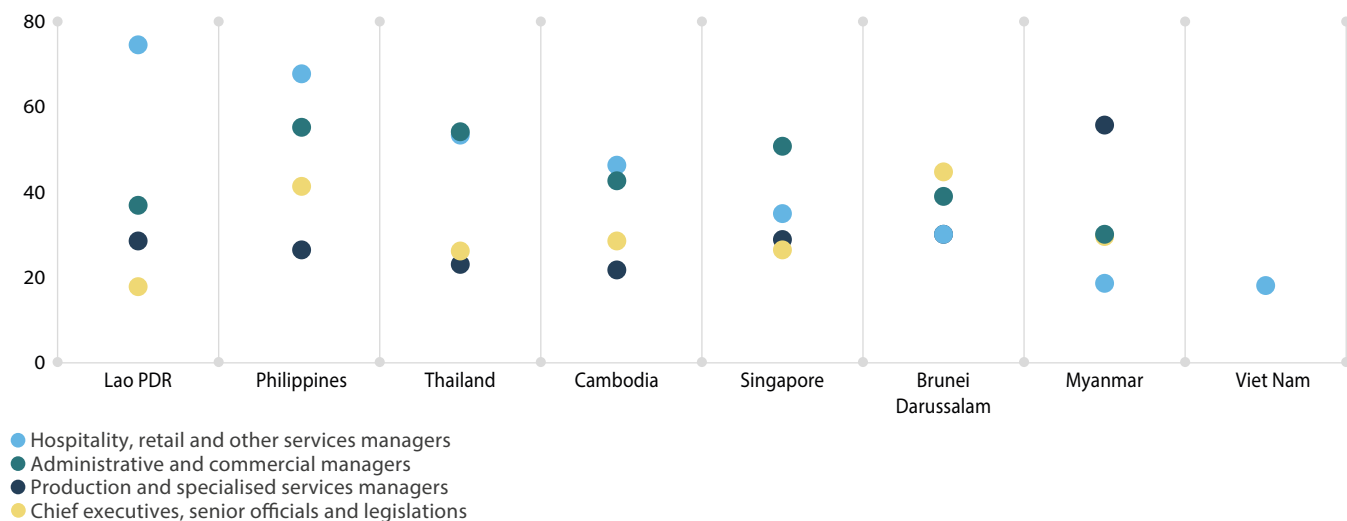
**Figure 1: Proportion of women in managerial positions, by level of management, latest available year (percentage)**



Source: ILOSTAT (accessed August 2022). No data were available for Malaysia for the proportion of women in middle and senior management.

Job segregation along gender lines is also an issue at managerial levels. Data show that women in management are clustered in certain positions (figure 2). Notably, women are more likely to have administrative and commercial managerial positions, and to be managers in hospitality, retail and other services, compared to other sectors (48 per cent of managers in administrative and commercial roles are women; as are 42 per cent of managers in retail and hospitality<sup>5</sup>). In turn, less than one third of chief executives, senior officials, legislators and managers in production and specialized services are women.<sup>6</sup> Increasing women’s representation in these types of jobs is important to ensure that women are able to shape political, economic and environmental decisions across the region.

**Figure 2: Proportion of managerial positions occupied by women, by type of managerial function, latest available year (percentage)**



Source: ILOSTAT (accessed August 2022). No data were available for Indonesia and Malaysia.

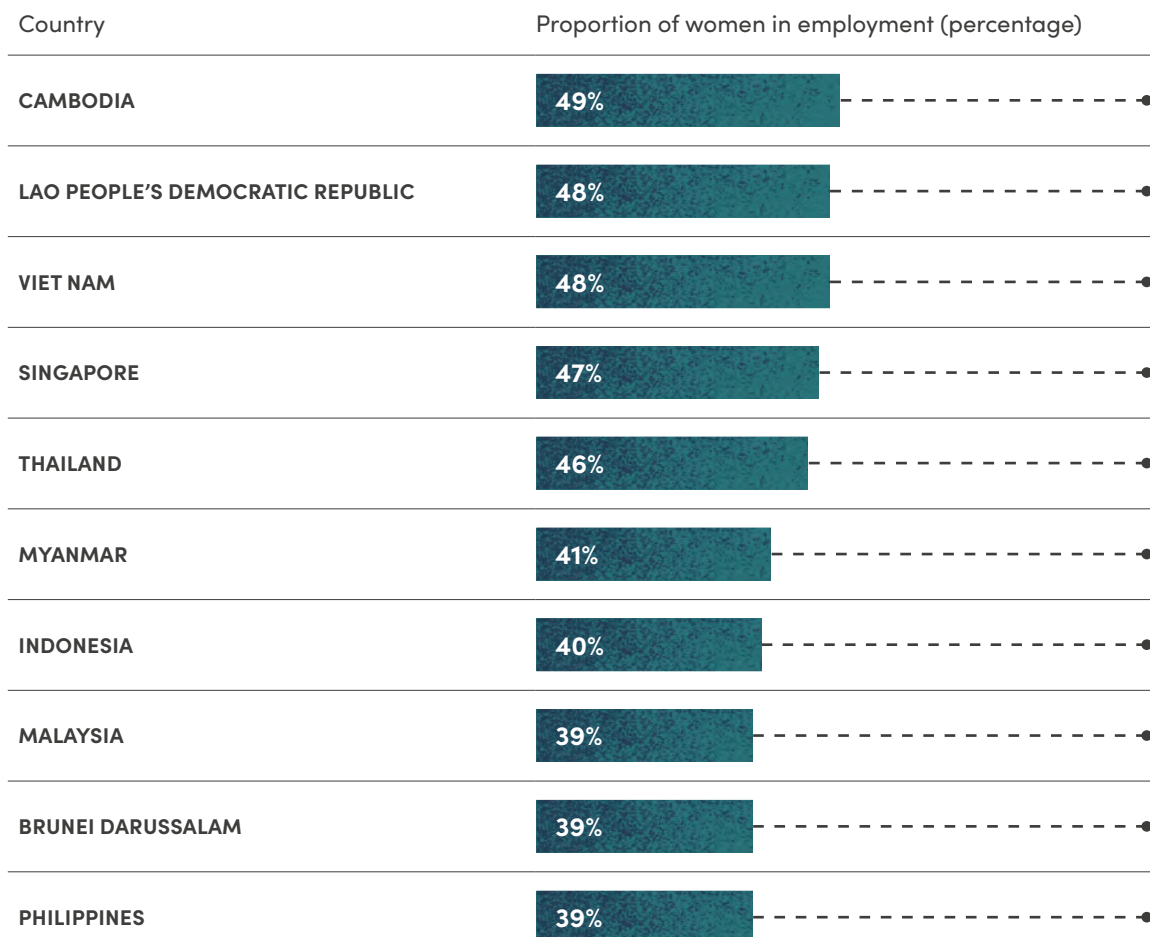
5 Regional aggregates calculated based on ILO estimates obtained from ILOSTAT and population estimates for women age 15+, obtained from World Population Prospects. Data on women managers in administrative and commercial roles were not available for Indonesia, Malaysia and Viet Nam; and data for women managers in retail and hospitality were not available for Indonesia and Malaysia.

6 Regional aggregates calculated based on ILO estimates obtained from ILOSTAT and population estimates for women age 15+, obtained from World Population Prospects. Data on women chief executives, senior officials, legislators and women managers in production and specialized services were not available for Indonesia, Malaysia and Viet Nam.

## CLOSING PAY GAPS MAY UNLEASH A POTENTIAL NEW GENERATION OF WOMEN LEADERS IN ASEAN COUNTRIES

Many women in ASEAN countries remain outside the labour market (figure 3). Unpaid care and domestic responsibilities, social norms and wage disparity, may be keeping women away from employment. In most trades, women earn less than men. For instance, in most ASEAN countries this is true for those engaging in agriculture. With the exception of the Philippines, women employed in mining and quarrying, electricity, gas and water supply also earn less than men across the region (figure 4). Similarly, women working in manufacturing, science, technical activities, wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles, accommodation, food service and activities for households, earn less than men in all ASEAN countries. These differences may be compounded by unequal pay levels for equal types of work, as well as by job segregation and glass ceilings (for instance, many women working in the human health sector may remain at administrative levels, while men may be more likely to hold managerial positions).

**Figure 3: Proportion of women in employment, latest available year**

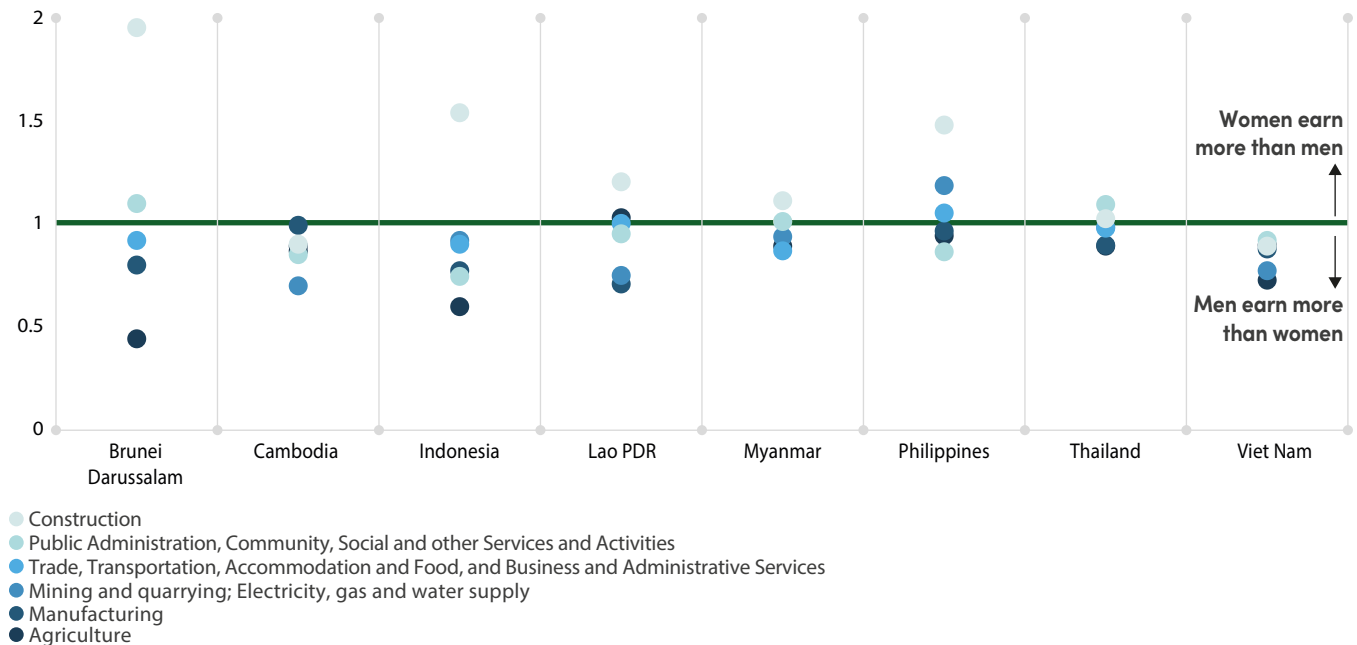


Source: ILOSTAT (accessed August 2022).

Note: The figure includes women ages 15 and above.

As a result, the compounded amount of women’s earnings remains below that of men’s (in 2017, employed women in ASEAN countries earned \$9 for every \$10 men earned).<sup>7</sup> Closing pay gaps may encourage women to engage in employment, which raises their agency both within and outside the home.<sup>8</sup> This may contribute to promoting career paths to leadership and decision-making, and opening doors to a new generation of women leaders in ASEAN countries.

**Figure 4: Gender gap for mean nominal monthly earnings of employees (women to men ratio), by economic activity, latest available year (2017 PPP \$)**



Source: ILOSTAT (accessed August 2022). No data were available for Indonesia and Malaysia.

## IN ASEAN COUNTRIES, WOMEN HAVE PLAYED A CRITICAL ROLE AS HEALTH WORKERS AND FRONT-LINE RESPONDERS TO THE PANDEMIC, BUT HOLD LIMITED DECISION-MAKING POWER IN THE HEALTH SECTOR

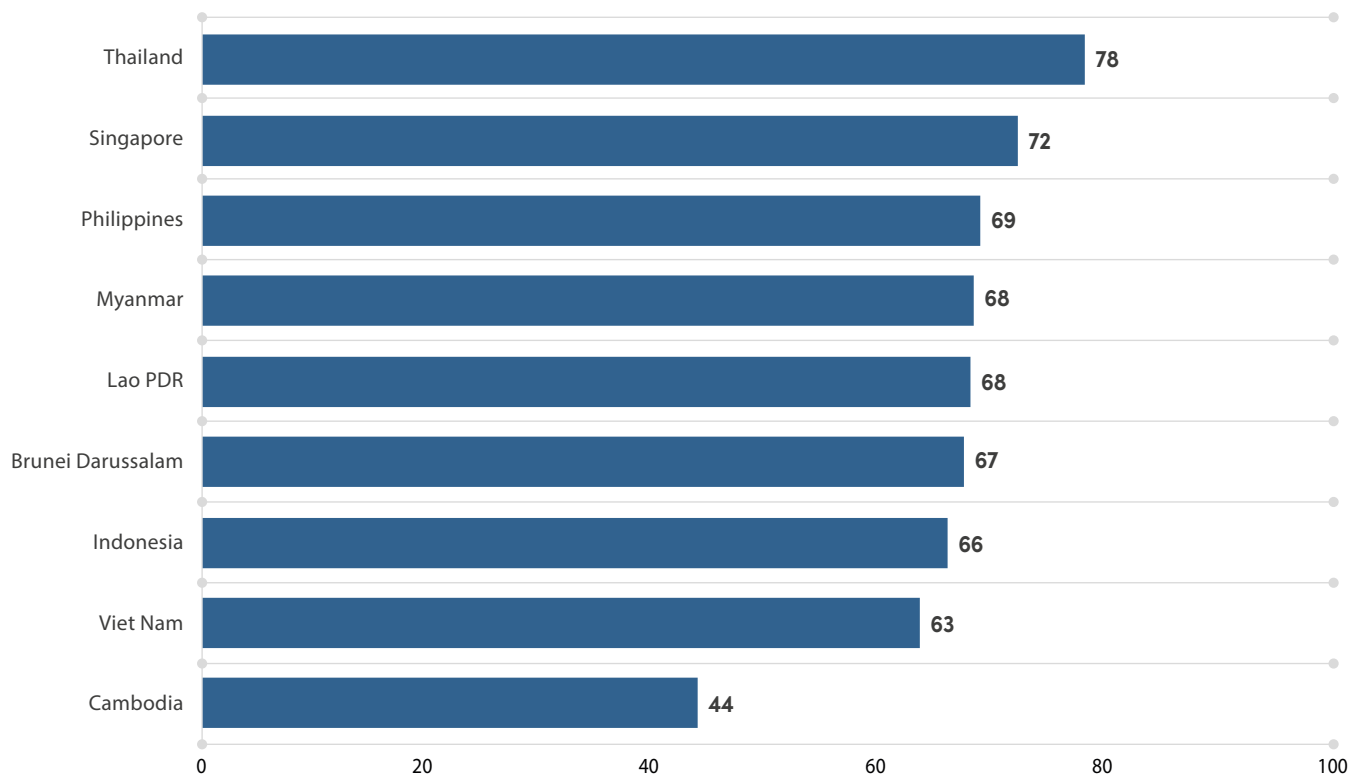
Available evidence shows that women have played an essential role during the COVID-19 pandemic, as health workers and front-line responders providing both paid and unpaid care services. In all countries with available data, women have provided the bulk of medical and physical care for their families. In Indonesia, for instance, women have been in charge of caring for children in 64 per cent of households, while men did so in only 5 per cent of households (in the remaining households, the task was either shared or outsourced to others, including paid domestic workers). Similarly, in 52 per cent of cases women cared for other adults, while men only did in 14 per cent of cases. At a time when health care was top priority, these services may have saved lives and allowed other household members to continue engaging in paid work and earning an income.

7 Aggregate calculated using data from ILOSTAT (accessed August 2022) on mean nominal monthly earnings of employees and population weights women age 15+ obtained from [World Population Prospects](#).

8 World bank (2014). [Voice and Agency: Empowering women and girls for shared prosperity](#).

Women's role in the health sector has also been critical during the pandemic, whether as community leaders, first responders, hospital doctors or support nurses. In ASEAN countries, women make up 67 per cent of those employed in human health related activities.<sup>9</sup> In Thailand, they make up almost 80 per cent (figure 5). And yet, women in ASEAN countries rarely have decision-making power in the health care sector. While it is encouraging that the current of Minister for Health in Viet Nam is a woman, Ministers for health are men in all other ASEAN countries.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, an analysis of hospital data revealed that only 11 per cent of chief executive officers in the region's biggest hospitals are women.<sup>11</sup> With such limited representation in health-related decision-making, women in ASEAN countries are unable to shape health policy and tailor services to women's needs, including those for COVID-19 response and recovery.

**Figure 5: Proportion of women among those employed in human health-related activities, latest available year (percentage)**



Source: ILOSTAT (accessed August 2022). Data were not available for Malaysia.

9 Regional aggregate calculated using estimates obtained from ILOSTAT (accessed August 2022) and weights for the women age 15+ obtained from World Population Prospects. No data were available for Malaysia.

10 As of 1st of September 2022.

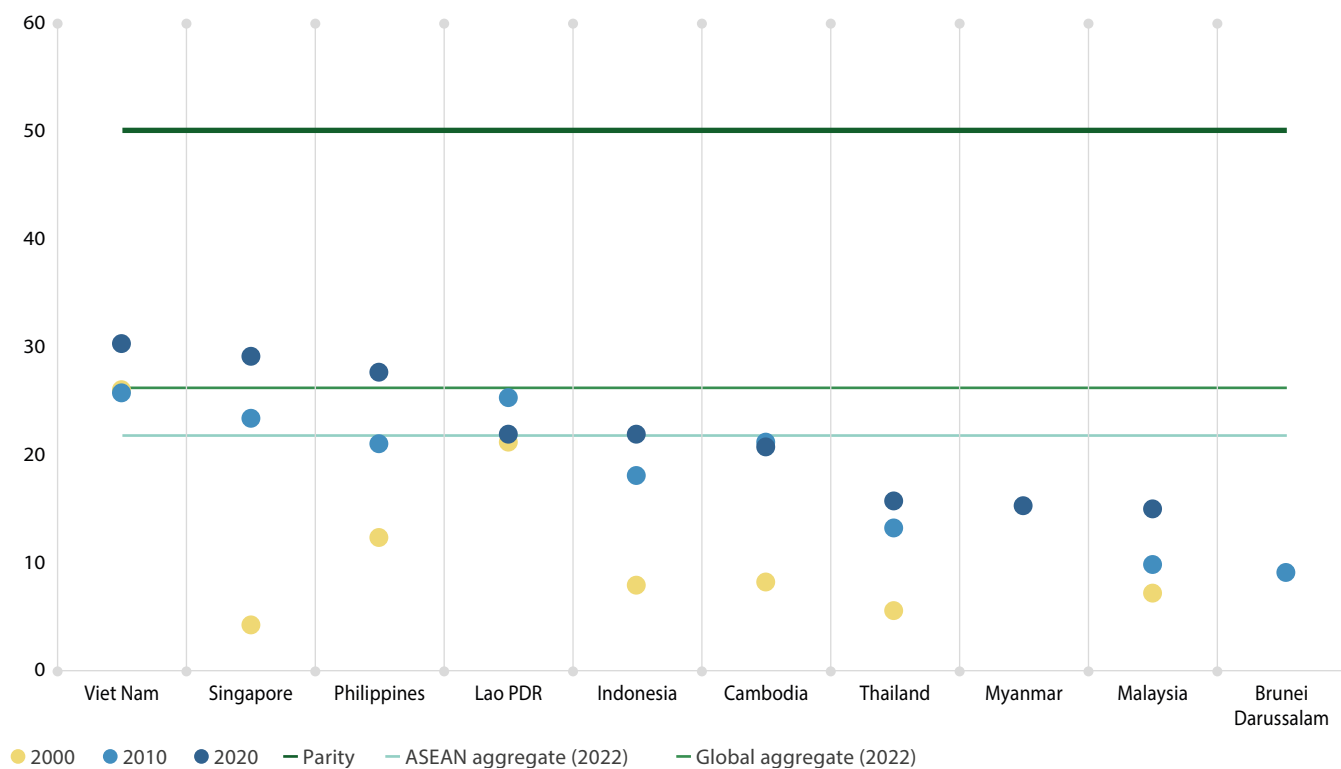
11 For each country, the biggest hospital by total number of beds were considered. The information on the sex of the chief executive officer/director general was gathered as of August 2022. No data were available for Myanmar.

## WOMEN’S REPRESENTATION IN PARLIAMENTS HAS INCREASED SUBSTANTIALLY, ALTHOUGH NOT IN ALL ASEAN COUNTRIES

National parliaments play a critical role in setting policy direction and budget allocation for sustainable development. Increasing representation of women in parliaments, particularly substantive representation and voices, can spearhead policy change in areas of key importance to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment, such as education, health care, decent work and care policies. Over the past two decades, ASEAN countries have made significant progress towards enhancing women’s representation in parliaments (from 12 per cent of seats held by women in 2000 to 22 per cent in 2022<sup>12</sup>), but the regional average still falls below the global figure of 26 per cent (figure 6). This is in part due to the low rates registered in Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, all of which see less than 20 per cent of seats held by women.

The presence of women elected representatives can have a positive effect on the engagement of women and girls in society at large.<sup>13</sup> Young people, who form a substantial part of the ASEAN population, remain largely underrepresented in parliaments. Less than 2 per cent of parliamentarians in South-East Asia are 30 years old or younger. An estimated 22 per cent are 45 years old or younger. These figures show that, in ASEAN countries, parliamentarians are older than the global average (globally 30 per cent are 45 years old or younger) and highlight that making room for younger decision-makers could enhance the coverage of issues of relevance for this demographic, such as access to jobs, technology and reproductive health care.

**Figure 6: Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments, 2000, 2010 and 2022 (percentage)**



Source: [Global SDG indicators database](#), last accessed August 2022. The aggregate for the ASEAN region follows the SDG regional grouping for South-eastern Asia and thus includes estimates for Timor-Leste. Data for Myanmar (2000 and 2010) and Brunei Darussalam (2000 and 2010) were not available.

12 [Global SDG indicators database](#) (accessed August 2022). Aggregate follows the SDG regional grouping for South-eastern Asia and includes estimates for Timor-Leste.

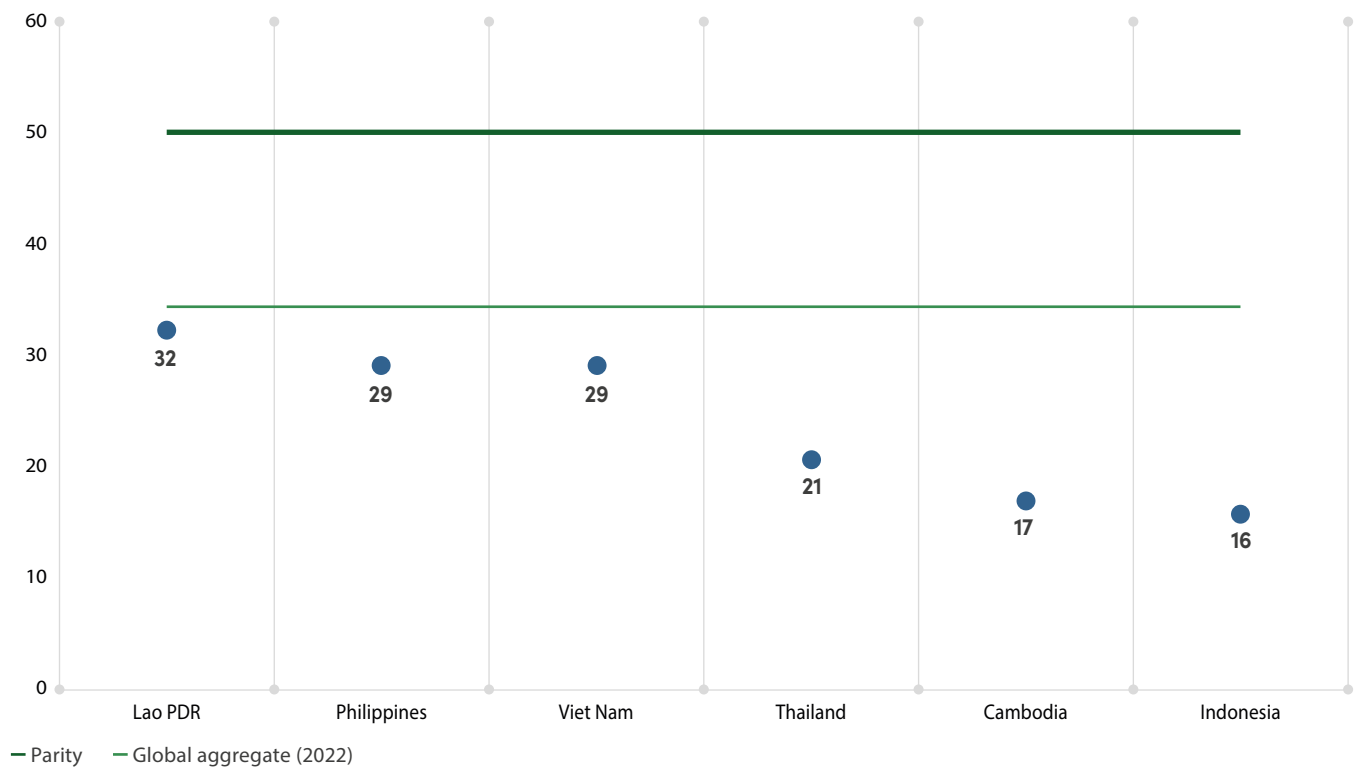
13 Esther Duflo (2012). *Women’s empowerment and economic development*. *Journal of Economic Literature*, vol. 50, No. 4, pp. 1051–1079.



Decentralizing the functions of government can also contribute to people's engagement in governance. Promoting women's participation in deliberative bodies of local government remains a key priority in ASEAN countries (figure 7). None of these countries have achieved parity in this regard, with the majority of elected seats held by men. Supporting women's engagement in local government may be an effective tool in encouraging policy change on the ground and increase women's overall participation at the national level.

There are opportunities to strengthen the connections between women's representation at national and local levels, including by engaging new generations of leaders and civil society actors to promote a common position on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

**Figure 7: Proportion of elected seats held by women in deliberative bodies of local government, latest available year (percentage)**



Source: [Global SDG indicators database](#) (accessed August 2022). Data were not available for Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore.

## WOMEN IN ASEAN COUNTRIES LEAD MINISTRIES FOR GENDER EQUALITY, BUT RARELY HOLD OTHER MINISTERIAL POSITIONS

Holding ministerial positions can provide women leaders the space for influencing national policies. Across ASEAN countries, however, women remain substantially underrepresented in Ministerial level jobs. *As of January 2021*, no ASEAN country had more than 20 per cent of women Ministers (Indonesia had the largest share at 17 per cent).<sup>14</sup>

Data show that women’s participation in high-level decision-making is often clustered around select portfolios. Of the ASEAN countries with available data disaggregated by type of ministry, none had women ministers for defense or human rights. Women are also underrepresented among chairs of specialized permanent committees in charge of foreign affairs (two out of five committees across upper or lower parliamentary chambers in ASEAN countries are chaired by a woman). However, women are likelier to chair committees related to gender equality, both in lower and upper chambers (these have a woman chair in seven out of nine committees across ASEAN countries with available data).

**Infographic 1: Proportion of specialized committees across upper and lower parliamentary chambers in ASEAN countries chaired by a woman, by focus area of the committee, 2022**



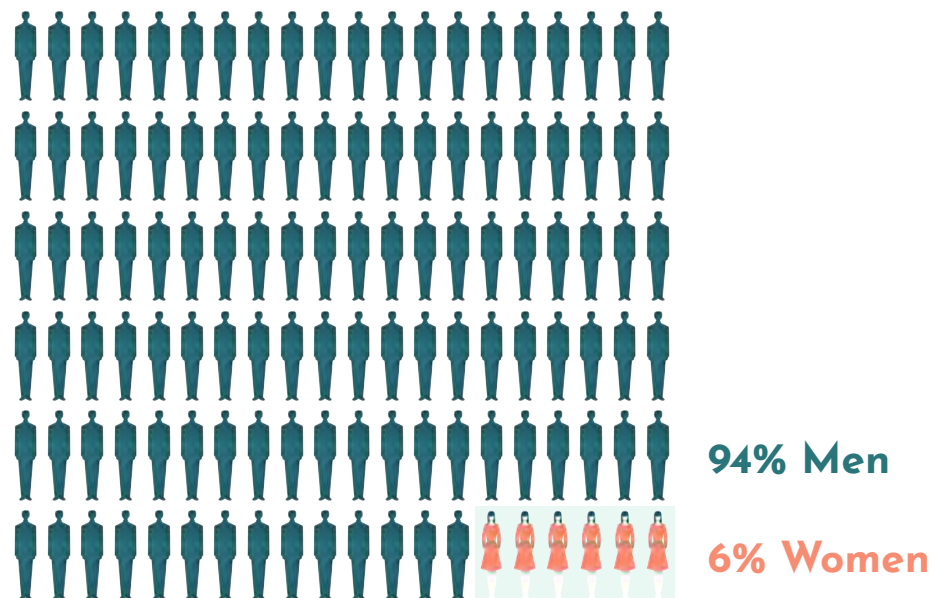
Source: [International Parliamentary Union \(IPU\) Parline database](#) (accessed August 2022). Note: In the ASEAN region, complete information on the sex of the chair is available for 8 Defense committees, 11 Finance committees, 10 Foreign affairs committees, 9 Gender Equality committees and 8 Human Rights committees. Data represents the share of women as chairs of committees, among all permanent committees in unicameral or bicameral parliaments, by area of focus. In Finance for instance, among the 11 committees across all countries in ASEAN, only one committee chair is a woman.

14 UN Women (2021). [Women in Politics: 2021](#).

## INCREASING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL DECISION-MAKING CAN CONTRIBUTE TO CONSERVATION EFFORTS, BOTH IN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SPHERES

As women and men engage differently with the environment, valuing and supporting their differentiated contributions is key to preventing environmental degradation.<sup>15</sup> At home and in their communities, women may play a critical role in leading sustainable resource management practices<sup>16</sup> and can be key actors in the fight against climate change. In addition, traditional ecological knowledge is typically held by indigenous women.<sup>17</sup> As such, the contributions of women can be critical to create transformational policies and practices for conservation. However, both in private firms and public institutions, women are often excluded from top-level decision-making positions. Across ASEAN countries, in 2020, only 6 per cent of environmental and related ministries had a female minister<sup>18</sup> (compared to the global aggregate for 15 per cent) (figure 8).

**Figure 8: Proportion of women ministers for the environment and related ministries, 2020 (percentage)**



Source: IUCN (2020) (accessed August 2022).

Note: Among ASEAN countries, complete information on the sex of environment and related ministers is available for a total of 36 ministries. These include ministries of Agriculture, Environment, Forestry, Food Industry, Energy, Land, Urbanization and Construction, Housing and Transportation, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Public Works and Highways, Rural Development, Mines and Natural Resources, Livestock and Irrigation, Agrarian Reform, Sustainability and Conservation, and Water Resources and Meteorology.

15 IUCN (2021). [New data reveals slow progress in achieving gender equality in environmental decision making.](#)

16 UNEP (2020). [Climate leadership for inspiration on Women's Day and every day.](#)

17 UNDESA (2021). [Challenges and opportunities for indigenous peoples' sustainability.](#)

18 IUCN (2020). In the ASEAN region, complete information on the sex of environment and related ministers is available for a total of 36 ministries.

