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Dimensions and Disparities of Women's Empowerment in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

Women's historical development worldwide reflects numerous interruptions and static periods as well as instances of rapid and progressive change. Women's historical memories are broad before being mapped along a timeline through Ancient History, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and Modern History. Women's societal position across cultures has varied greatly; at times, the cultural view of women has fluctuated between being very progressive and reactionary to cultural transformation. The need for women's equality through separation (or women's unification) stems from the vast range of socio-economic experiences across cultures, and women's continued quest for educational opportunities and economic self-sufficiency, as well as a place within the patriarchal social structure. Women's efforts to develop their own voice, escape the oppression of a male-dominated society, and break away from the shackles that exist due to socio-economic power structures of the past and present exist on a continuum of cases.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Socio-Economic Power, Self-Sufficiency, Cultural Transformation, Ancient History.

Introduction

Women's empowerment is presently a hot button discussion in our contemporary environment, and it represents the transformation of the ability for women to have the choice and confidence to project their future as they see fit through their own decision-making and actions. This change encompasses all aspects of women's empowerment and includes elements that create opportunities for women to gain access to quality education; participate in the economy; manage resources; have representation in politics; make decisions regarding their own lives; access to legal protections; and make health and reproductive decisions regarding their bodies and wellbeing and includes the right to societal acknowledgement. As a result of these factors, Women's empowerment is now firmly viewed as a fundamental element of Sustainable Development, Social Justice and Inclusive Governance throughout the

World. The level of global and international recognition of Women's empowerment is reflected in such milestones as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the fifth goal of which is dedicated exclusively to Gender Equality.

In this project, we are trying to show how geography (where you are) and sociology (people's interactions with each other) influence the social and cultural structure of women in Southeast Asia. As a result of this, we are investigating the history of women in Southeast Asia in a holistic way, including traditional and colonial influences on the position of women, but also rapid changes following the attainment of independence. Current factors that positively contribute to the elevation of women's status include (1) an increase in literacy, (2) a myriad of work opportunities, (3) exposure to the international community through globalisation, and (4) the support of some governments toward women. However, while some women in Southeast Asia are experiencing some degree of success with respect to these factors, the majority of women in the region continue to experience limited success. Women of the region experience a mix of success and limitation since some countries are advancing rapidly while others remain in the midst of transformation.

A Geographical Overview of Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is a region with a large amount of strategic importance due to its numerous natural resources and location on the globe. The area is a geographical bridge between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. It provides access from South Asia, East Asia, and globally, to each of these oceans. It lies between ten degrees south latitude and twenty-eight degrees north latitude, and ninety-two degrees east longitude, nearly to one hundred- and forty-one-degrees east longitude. Southeast Asia consists of eleven nations: five in mainland Southeast Asia — Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam; six in maritime Southeast Asia Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei and Timor-Leste. The physical geography of Southeast Asia has a significant impact on people's daily lives, including the types of economies and social organizations. As a result of this significant difference in geography, women's experiences and opportunities vary greatly among the different areas of Southeast Asia, depending on the geography of where they live.

The physiography of the region consists of a variety of features like very fertile river valleys, deltas, coastal plains as well as a difficult island system. The very nature of these physical features prescribes the economic activities that will be done, with agriculture, fisheries, trade and informal sector work being the main ones, among which female participation has always been significant. The Mekong, Irrawaddy, Chao Phraya, and Red Rivers are the main areas for wet-land rice cultivation and agro-based livelihoods. In these rural areas, women are vital not only because they are a large part of the workers' group but also because they help the family economically.

On the other hand, the hilly and isolated interior areas, particularly in the case of Laos, Myanmar, and some parts of the Indonesian and Philippine islands, reveal a different situation. Such areas usually have little infrastructure and are therefore hard to reach; so, children cannot go to school, and people cannot go to hospitals or formal jobs, which keeps the gender inequality in terms of space alive.

Southeast Asia, in terms of climate, is primarily influenced by the tropical monsoon and the equatorial climate, which are both characterized by heavy rainfall and the occurrence of natural disasters, among them the floods, cyclones, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. These circumstances impact the different sexes in different ways. For example, women who live in rural and coastal areas are usually the most affected by the climate getting worse and turning their lives unsecure. On the other hand, they are also the ones who mainly manage resources, hence helping communities in terms of disaster resilience, and adapting to the new situation. Besides, the strategic maritime location of the region and its close ties with global trade networks have stimulated rapid industrialization and urbanization. A shift in the economy has created new opportunities for female workers, such as those in manufacturing, service industries, and global job markets. It also raises issues relating to worker's right, as well as migration and social security.



Figure 1: An outline map of Southeast Asia

Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica

Indicators of Women Empowerment

Southeast Asian countries have empowered their women over the years through a unique process influenced by colonial pasts, local cultures, religious beliefs, and fast economic growth after independence. It is true that women in some Southeast Asian societies, particularly those in agrarian and trading sectors, had more

freedom in managing their households and participating in local markets than women in many other places in the Global South (Andaya, 2006). Nevertheless, over the times, the strengthening of male-dominated systems, the changes in politics, and the different modernization rates led to the continuation of these gender relations that, in most cases, limited women's access to power and resources.

In contemporary times, women's empowerment is increasingly considered through the lenses of female literacy, workforce participation, entrepreneurship, health outcomes, and political representation, among others. Even with all of these improvements, there are still many inequalities concerning these improvements. These disparities stem from many different factors including level of income, urban versus rural differences, as well as the habitual existence of social norms. Regions that are empowered include regions that have access to education, employment, health care and reproductive rights, political representation, legal protection from gender-based violence (UNDP, 2023). The three factors that are driving change throughout Southeast Asia include Globalization, Urbanization and Digital Transformation; Women's Empowerment has become a key aspect to achieving Inclusive Economic Growth and Social Resilience, which have been identified as key needs for the region. At the same time, Women face challenges due to two competing realities; the Traditional Expectations of Society and their desire for a Modern-Day Women's Empowerment (ADB, 2021).

The Gender Inequality Index (GII) published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is an indication of the ongoing problems surrounding gender inequality. Most ASEAN nations are located within the mid to lower range of the world rankings, suggesting that there is moderate to high inequality regarding reproductive health, women's empowerment, and participation in the labour market. For example, the country of Cambodia is ranked very low in relation to other countries in the region (112 out of 159), which indicates that there are significant issues with regards to the availability of education and political representation in Cambodia.

Female Literacy

The situation of women's education in Southeast Asia is a success story with the area's large differences in female literacy rates among the countries. The factors that have to do with this general picture are the countries' historical experiences, their state capacity, and the socio-cultural contexts. The countries of Singapore, Brunei, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia have among the highest female literacy rates in the world, which usually is more than 94-96%. One of the main reasons for this success is the availability of public investment in education, gender parity established very early in life, urbanization that is very fast, and strong institutional support (UNESCO, 2023). On the other hand, countries like Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar,

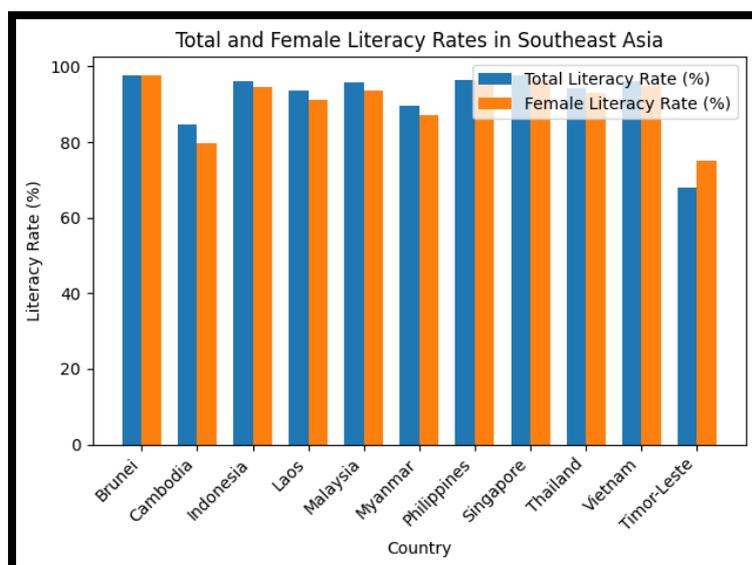
and Timor-Leste have lower female literacy levels. Such situations continue to be affected by war, colonialism, rural poverty, a lack of educational infrastructure, and such rules that are often found in patriarchal structures which may either give priority to boy's education or limit girl's schooling by confining them to household duties.

Though primary education access has widened, particularly in deprived areas gender gaps are growing at secondary and tertiary levels. Early marriage, unpaid care giving, and safety concerns are among the factors that often break girls' schooling. High literacy is a basic empowerment driver, connected with higher labour force participation, better health and lower maternal mortality. On the contrary, low literacy continues to reinforce the cycles of poverty and social exclusion.

Table 1: Total and Female Literacy Rates of Southeast Asian Nations

S.No	Country	Total Literacy Rate (%)	Female Literacy Rate (%)
1	Brunei	97.5	97.5
2	Cambodia	84.7	79.8
3	Indonesia	96.0	94.5
4	Laos	93.5	91.0
5	Malaysia	95.7	93.5
6	Myanmar	89.5	87.0
7	Philippines	96.3	96.0
8	Singapore	97.6	96.5
9	Thailand	94.1	93.0
10	Vietnam	96.1	95.0
11	Timor-Leste	68.0	75.0

Source: UNESCO & World Bank Data (Compiled)



Graph 1: Total and Female Literacy Rates of Southeast Asian Nations.

Economic Participation

Southeast Asia's Women's economic participation is a testament to the changing world; however, the region still clings to gender norms that are centuries old. The region has recorded the highest female labour force participation (FLFP) rates to date, and thus, its average is around 60%, which is considered exceptional when compared to South Asia's 30% (World Bank, 2024). Notwithstanding, such a figure does not reflect the disparities that exist in the job quality, distribution of productive resources, and the number of women in leadership. The situation is the same across the region where women only account for 20% of the parliamentary seats and 10-15% of the corporate board positions which are the main causes of their inability to influence the strategic sectors like finance and technology.

Regional Context

The regional setting pits these differences against each other. The situation is very different in the three high-income economies of Singapore, Brunei, and Malaysia where women have access to better formal-sector employment and have legal protections. On the other hand, lower-income or post-conflict countries like Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Timor-Leste restrict women's chances due to poverty and instability. The differences in structure determine the pattern of employment: in the rural areas of Laos, more than 80% of women workers are in the informal sector while Singapore has high participation in professional and business services. The OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI 2024) point out moderate to high discrimination in social norms and legal frameworks that include unequal inheritance rights and widespread gender-based violence, thereby restricting women's full economic participation.

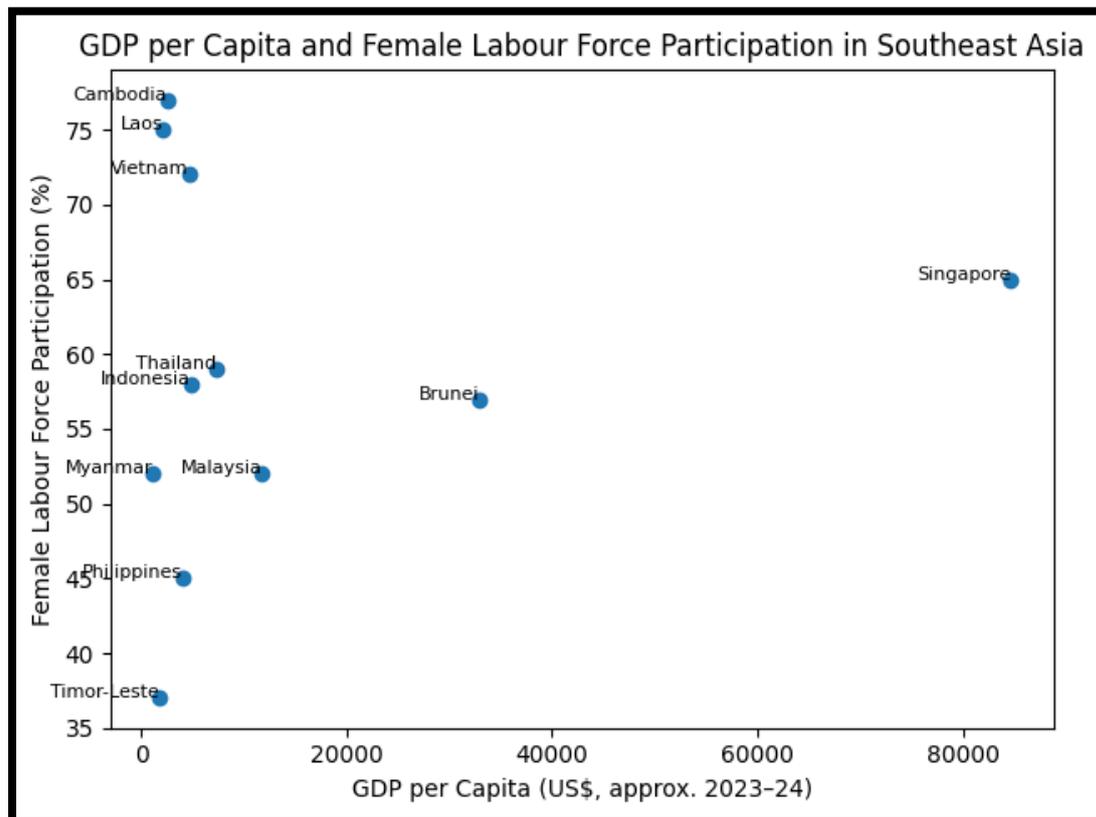
Income and Labour Force Participation

The GDP per capita and female labour force participation rates (FLFP) illustrate contrasting trends - Being a wealthier country does not equate to having higher levels of female participation within the economy. An example would be that while Singapore's GDP is estimated at \$84,000, only 65% of its population are engaged in economic activity. In contrast, Vietnam has an estimated GDP of \$4,700 and has a reported FLFP of approximately 72%, with the manufacturing and agricultural sectors being the primary contributors to this number. On the other hand, Cambodia (GDP ~ \$2,600) enjoys an FLFP of more than 77%, but it is mainly in the low-paid agricultural and informal sectors. This indicates that the structure of the economy and the demand for labour are often the main factors affecting participation rather than income levels alone.

Table 2: GDP and Female Labour Force Participation of Southeast Asian Countries.

S.No	Country	GDP per capita (US\$, ~2023–24)	Female labour force participation (% 15+)
1	Singapore	84,700	65%
2	Brunei	33,000	57%
3	Malaysia	11,800	52%
4	Thailand	7,300	59%
5	Indonesia	4,900	58%
6	Vietnam	4,700	72%
7	Philippines	4,000	45%
8	Cambodia	2,600	77%
9	Laos	2,100	75%
10	Myanmar	1,200	52% (pre-coup estimates 2021)
11	Timor-Leste	1,700	37%

Source: The Global Economy and World Bank (2023-24)



Graph 2: GDP and Female Labour Force Participation of Southeast Asian Countries

Sectoral Roles and Quality of Employment

In the world of the labour market, quality disparities are ever-present. The case is such that in both Cambodia and Laos, female population is majority in the category of unpaid family agriculture. On the other hand, in the case of Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, women are trapped in the occupations of teaching and healthcare, very much so that men are monopolizing finance and engineering. Such inequalities are also present in developed economies like Singapore where gender wage differences are still common, and the number of women in top corporate positions is minimal.

Women Participation in Power and Decision Making

Although women have made progress in the areas of education and economy, they still lack a fair representation in decision-making processes. The average percentage of women in parliaments is merely 20%. In the business area, women get only 10-15% of the top management positions. In rural areas of Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic, women hardly get to express their opinions in community decision-making.

Table 3: Decision Making Indicators Regarding Women Participation in Power and Decision Making

S.No	Country	Women in national parliament (share, recent)	Women in senior management (approximate trend)	Notable aspects of decision-making power
1	Vietnam	Around one-quarter of MPs are women	Growing presence in state-owned enterprises	Party structures open some pathways for women leaders, including in local councils.
2	Philippines	Roughly 28–30% women MPs and several high-profile women leaders	Significant but still minority share of executives	Strong tradition of women in politics but patriarchal clans and church influence remain.
3	Singapore	About 30% women MPs after recent elections	Rising but below parity in boards	State policies promote meritocracy and parental leave, yet unpaid care limits advancement.
4	Cambodia	Below 20% women MPs	Very low share of top management	Deeply entrenched gender norms; women active in civil society but weak in formal politics.
5	Laos, Myanmar, Timor-Leste	Below 25% women MPs	Women rarely occupy top posts	Customary law and conflict histories restrict women's power and land rights.

Source: Disruptive Asia, Asia Society (2022-23)

Structural Barriers for Women Empowerment

- **Legal Frameworks:** The personal status laws of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Cambodia that discriminate against women in marriage and inheritance gradually deplete women's properties.
- **Care Responsibilities:** Women perform unpaid care work that is 4-10 times greater in amount than men's, thereby limiting their opportunities for career growth.
- **Education and Skills:** The gap in education has disappeared in general, but girls are still not present in STEM fields as much as they should be, and this restricts their access to high-productivity sectors.
- **Migration and Remittances:** A number of women from the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Myanmar are working abroad as domestic helpers, where they undergo mistreatment, yet they are the ones sending money home.

Social Conditions

Southeast Asian women are confronted with a complicated societal setting and at the same time with a very different situation through the human eye. Marriage, inheritance, and care work arrangements that are women dominated are the most decisive factors of inequality. The OECD's SIGI 2024 report indicates that in some places, discriminatory practices have deteriorated thereby further consolidating the traditional view that women should choose family over career.

Domestic and Gender-Based Violence

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a major public health problem. WHO data indicate that almost 30% of women worldwide have suffered from either physical or sexual violence, with the Southeast Asian region having the highest prevalence of such cases (33–38%). The outbreak of COVID-19 worsened the situation, and there were more reports of maltreatment. Despite the existence of legal measures in countries like Indonesia and Thailand, however, the phenomenon of under-reporting is still a major problem caused mainly by stigma and the pressure to keep family reputation intact.

Table 4: Social Conditions of Women and Legal Frameworks on Family and Violence

Country	Legal framework on violence & family	Social pattern of domestic violence and family position (qualitative, comparative)
Singapore	Comprehensive laws on family violence and harassment; relatively strong enforcement mechanisms.	Lower reported prevalence than in many neighbours, but social expectations around respectability can discourage reporting; women generally have higher bargaining power within nuclear families.

Malaysia	Domestic Violence Act and syariah-based family laws operate in parallel, creating mixed protections.	Women may be economically active but remain constrained by patriarchal interpretations of religion and family law; divorce and property claims can be complex and discourage exit from abusive relationships.
Indonesia	Law on domestic violence and child protection; plural legal system with strong role of religious courts.	High tolerance for male authority in the household; many women endure psychological and economic abuse, and community pressure often favours reconciliation over prosecution.
Thailand	Laws against domestic violence and marital rape exist, but enforcement is uneven, especially in rural areas.	Alcohol use, migration of men for work, and economic stress contribute to household conflict; NGOs have built shelter networks, but social stigma persists.
Philippines	Strong legislation on violence against women and children, plus active women's movements and shelters.	Women's higher visibility in politics does not eliminate domestic abuse; Catholic norms on marriage and divorce can make it harder to leave violent unions, especially for poorer women.
Vietnam	Laws promote gender equality and criminalise domestic violence; mass organisations implement awareness campaigns.	Socialist legacy supports the ideal of the "working mother", but patriarchal family hierarchies and son preference still shape decision-making; violence is often framed as a private matter.
Cambodia	Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence exists but local knowledge and enforcement are limited.	Poverty, post-conflict trauma, and reliance on women's wages in garments and informal work shape complex power dynamics; women may contribute heavily to family income yet remain subordinate in decision.
Laos	Legal commitments to gender equality coexist with strong customary norms and patrilineal practices in many ethnic groups.	Women participate actively in agriculture and petty trade but are underrepresented in community councils and often excluded from major land or inheritance decisions.
Myanmar	Political crisis has weakened protections; multiple personal status laws govern different ethnic and religious groups.	Conflict, displacement, and militarisation have increased risks of sexual and gender-based violence, while justice mechanisms for survivors remain weak.
Timor-Leste	Domestic violence is criminalised, and national strategies promote gender equality after the independence struggle.	Deeply entrenched bride-price customs and poverty limit women's ability to exit violent relationships; community mediation may prioritise family unity over women's safety.
Brunei	Protective legislation exists alongside conservative religious norms and strict public morality codes.	Women's education and employment are relatively high, but family relations remain strongly hierarchical, with social pressure to keep marital conflict private.

Source: OECD (2024), Brookings Institutions (2020), Development in Southeast Asia.

Poverty, Basic Services, and Everyday Safety

Inequality between genders is still there even though poverty has gone down. The number of women living in poverty is higher than that of men with 2.66 million women and 2.31 million men in the region. The very poor women living in rural areas still have difficulties getting clean water and fuel which adds up to their time burdens and health risks. In addition, women are feeling less secure with 22% of them saying so and that public harassment is the main reason.

Social Deprivations

The infrastructure in rich countries helps women to some extent with the burden of care. Poor countries on the other hand faceless women with a situation resulting from lack of basic services that does not give them any time for personal growth. Health access is quite similar to this: affluent states enjoy great coverage while poor parts of Cambodia and Timor-Leste have insufficient resources. In addition, women's freedom in going to the doctors is also limited by the traditional views in the outskirts.

Persistent Gaps in Decision-Making, Norms, and Protection

Decision-making in households continues to be very much a man's world, especially when it comes to major assets. Even in cases where women are the breadwinners, men usually hold the title of "head of the household." Furthermore, the legal protections provided differ from country to country, with Singapore having established effective systems while Cambodia and Myanmar continue to face challenges with enforcement. The women living in rural areas of the region are subjected to the worst combination of poverty and violence.

Health Conditions

In Southeast Asia, women's health has advanced significantly in the last twenty years due to expanded access to primary health care, expanding immunization campaigns and a more robust maternal health program. Between 2010-2020, regional initiatives to reduce maternal, newborn and child deaths led to a 41 percent decline in the number of maternal deaths in Southeast Asia compared to a 12 percent decline globally during the same time period (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023; also, WHO, 2025). Despite these achievements, there are significant inequalities between countries; for instance, many rural areas continue to have limited access to quality services due to poverty, rural-urban divides and sociocultural barriers (WHO, 2023). Inequities are particularly evident with respect to antenatal care coverage, skilled birth attendance and emergency obstetric care access for women living in rural and remote areas (Vora et al., 2020). These substantial gaps continued in nutrition, with anaemia affecting approximately 30.7% of the world's women of reproductive age, creating health risks for both mothers and infants (WHO, 2025). The combined impact of

malnutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and an increase in sedentary lifestyle-related diseases will pose long-term health challenges for women in their reproductive years (Times of India, 2025).

Maternal Mortality and Reproductive Health

The similarity between the maternal mortality rates (MMR) in different countries in Southeast Asia and their healthcare and economic development is evident. Countries like Singapore and Brunei (wealthy countries) have a high number of mothers who have received skilled care and have developed an efficient health system, resulting in a low MMR (<10 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births). In contrast, Timor-Leste and Cambodia have high MMRs (over 150 per 100,000 live births) which are attributed to the lack of access to trained birth attendants and to emergency obstetric services in rural areas of these two countries (WHO, 2023).

The total fertility rate within the region has decreased dramatically in most countries due in large part to increased access to education for women, increased number of women joining the workforce and family planning initiatives. For example, Thailand's TFR is approximately 1.3; one of the lowest in the region, while Timor-Leste has the highest TFR at approximately 3.9; as a result of differences in access to contraceptives, economic growth, the standard of living and cultural attitudes toward women and fathers. According to estimates published in various documents on reproductive health; In Southeast Asia, the average contraceptive prevalence for modern methods is approximately 47%; lower than the world average and of much greater variation between countries and within them based on the various levels of urban–rural residence and education levels (Number Analytics, n.d.; OECD, 2024).

The average contraceptive prevalence rate is 47%, indicating that there are significant unmet contraceptive needs. Furthermore, antenatal care coverage is similarly disparate; while upper-income countries report over 90% coverage for antenatal care, lower-income countries experience rates below 70%. For example, while Laos and Timor-Leste's overall antenatal care coverage falls below 70%, both provide limited routine services, including blood pressure checks, administering tetanus immunization, and providing nutritional recommendations (Vora et al., 2020; Number Analytics, n.d.).

Table 5: Key Health Indicators: Maternal Mortality Rate, Total Fertility Rate & Skill Births.

S. No	Country	Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births)	Total fertility rate (children per woman)	Skilled birth attendance (%)
1	Singapore	8	1.0	100
2	Brunei	15	1.8	99
3	Malaysia	29	1.8	99

4	Thailand	20	1.3	99
5	Vietnam	43	1.9	98
6	Indonesia	189	2.2	89
7	Philippines	78	2.4	87
8	Myanmar	174	2.1	78
9	Cambodia	152	2.5	86
10	Laos	185	2.4	74
11	Timor-Leste	215	3.9	61

Source: World Health Organization (2023).

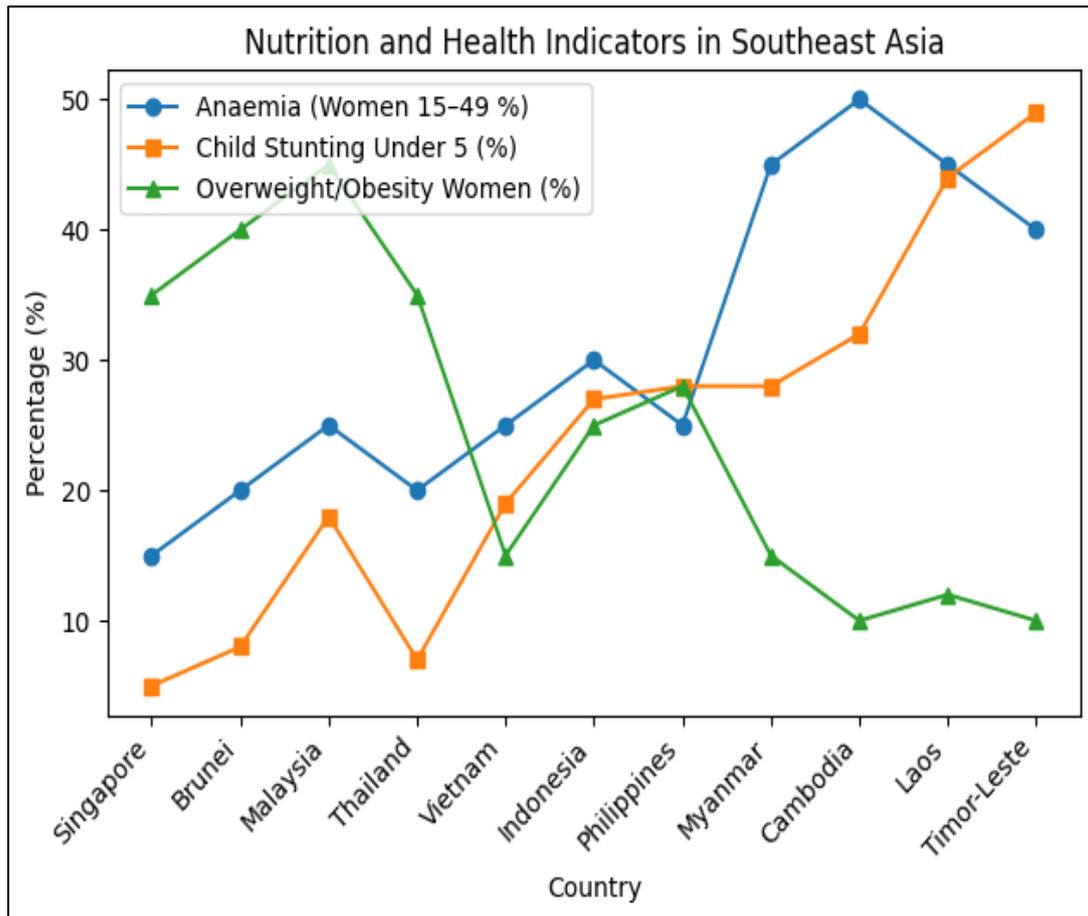
Nutrition and Anaemia Among Women

Anaemia represents a significant health problem for an estimated 40% to 50% of females living in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. Anaemia is associated with the prevalence of poverty, lack of sanitary conditions, and having multiple pregnancies. On the other hand, there is a growing number of individuals suffering from obesity in both Thailand and Malaysia who represent an additional health burden – referred to as the "double burden" of malnutrition.

Table 6: Health and Nutrition Indicators

S. No	Country	Anaemia in Women 15–49 (%)	Child Stunting under 5 (%)	Overweight/Obesity Women (%)
1	Singapore	15	5	35
2	Brunei	20	8	40
3	Malaysia	25	18	45
4	Thailand	20	7	35
5	Vietnam	25	19	15
6	Indonesia	30	27	25
7	Philippines	25	28	28
8	Myanmar	45	28	15
9	Cambodia	50	32	10
10	Laos	45	44	12
11	Timor-Leste	40	49	10

Source: World Health Organization (2025b, 2025c)



Graph 3: Nutrition and Health Indicators in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

Southeast Asian women face many contrasting landscapes and uneven levels of economic growth throughout the region. A significant dichotomy exists between the highly developed nations of the region; Singapore (the most developed) and Malaysia (the second most developed) often confront women with glass ceilings, despite their economic participation throughout much of the export sector (for example, Vietnam and Cambodia). A significant portion of the culture is still anchored to traditional social norms that promote domestic violence against women and create an unequal burden of labour responsibility between the genders. In addition, legal protections for women from these issues differ significantly between the various countries within the Southeast Asian Region. Finally, access to healthcare and quality of healthcare for women varies greatly throughout Southeast Asia, with considerable disparities in healthcare outcomes for women between countries within the region. One extreme example would be Brunei, which has almost universally acceptable maternal health

and safety standards, compared to the extremely high rates of maternal mortality in Myanmar and Cambodia, as well as the widespread prevalence of malnutrition, as shown by the high levels of anaemia among women in Southeast Asia.

The link between women's education and literacy suggests that women are becoming empowered because they have the same or greater levels of education compared with men in many parts of the world. Increased education for women is directly associated with lower fertility, increased participation in the workforce, and enhanced ability to negotiate within the family. To translate this educational advancement into reduced violence against women and real decision-making authority for women, there needs to be a significant change in the policies that are currently in place. This change will not be accomplished by providing access to educational institutions only but will require a comprehensive policy response that addresses the structural and cultural aspects of gender inequality.

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