



EMPOWERING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN ASEAN

Addressing Challenges, Embracing Opportunities

POLICY BRIEF



This document was developed as part of the OECD Southeast Asia Regional Programme's Gender Initiative and was drafted by Stacey Bellido under the supervision of Akane Nozawa and Max Bulakovskiy. It was produced in collaboration with Cengiz Arıkan and benefitted from further comments by Sara Grubanov-Boskovic from the OECD Istanbul Centre and David Halabisky from the OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities.

This work was made possible thanks to all the women entrepreneurs who participated in the survey and shared their insightful experiences. We extend our appreciation to the ASEAN Secretariat for their cooperation in facilitating the distribution of the survey across the region, as well as SPARK! Philippines, Indonesian Women Entrepreneurs Association (IWAPI), and SHE Investments for their valuable insights.

We are also grateful for the financial support from the Federal Foreign Office of Germany in the development of this document.



Federal Foreign Office

Disclaimer:

The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries. This document and any map included herein are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

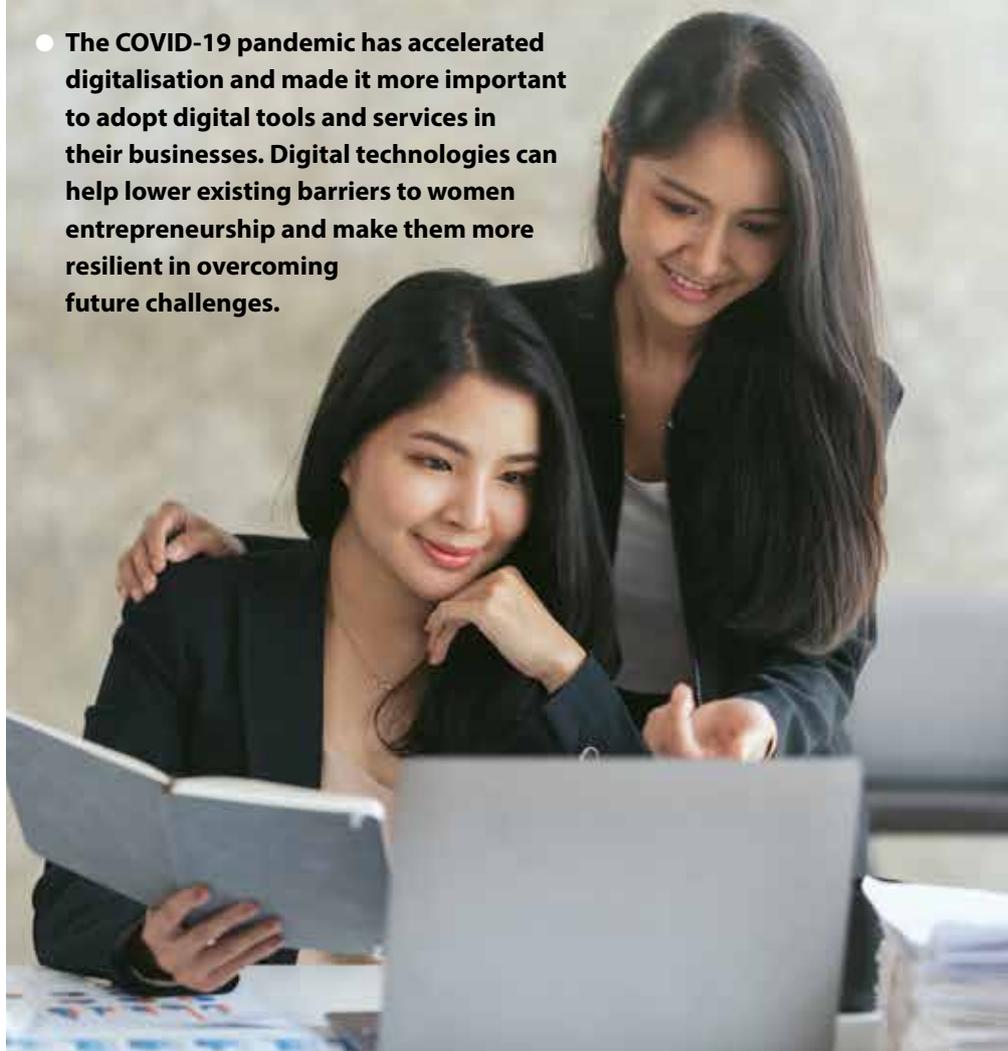
You can copy, download or print OECD content for your own use, and you can include excerpts from OECD publications, databases and multimedia products in your own documents, presentations, blogs, websites and teaching materials, provided that suitable acknowledgement of OECD as source and copyright owner is given.



BETTER POLICIES FOR BETTER LIVES

Key insights

- **Women entrepreneurs in ASEAN are a diverse group encompassing a wide range of demographic, educational, and business characteristics across different profiles. This heterogeneity reflects the unique socio-economic and cultural contexts within each country, and underscores the importance of tailored policies and support programmes that address the diverse needs of women entrepreneurs in the region.**
- **Access to finance remains a major and common challenge to women entrepreneurship development in ASEAN. This intersects with other key barriers women entrepreneurs face in further stages of their business development such as high operational costs of expansion and a limited budget to keep up with digital trends.**
- **The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digitalisation and made it more important to adopt digital tools and services in their businesses. Digital technologies can help lower existing barriers to women entrepreneurship and make them more resilient in overcoming future challenges.**



Background and objectives

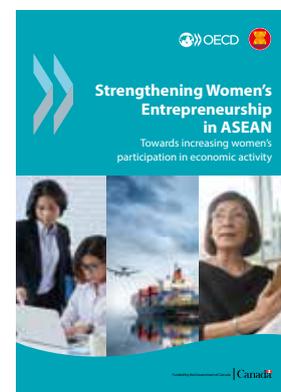
Women entrepreneurs play a pivotal role in driving ASEAN's economic growth and diversification. **Agencies and ministries that support micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in ASEAN countries are actively working to improve the policy environment for women-owned and -led businesses** and have developed the policymakers toolkit "*Strengthening Women's Entrepreneurship in National Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise Policies and Action Plans*" in collaboration with stakeholders.

In 2017, as part of its work under **the OECD Southeast Asia Regional Programme's Gender Initiative**, the OECD, in collaboration with ASEAN, published a report on ***Strengthening Women's Entrepreneurship in ASEAN***. The report delves into the factors driving women's economic participation and entrepreneurship across the region and provides policymakers with recommendations on a range of policy tools and best practices that can help unlock women's full potential. The report underscored that despite the region's substantial progress in reducing gender gaps, economic performance varies significantly across countries, often due to inherited customs, social norms, and individual economic development patterns. Moreover, the Gender Initiative's work is further informed by the OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) which provides cross-country measures of discriminatory social institutions. The forthcoming SIGI Regional Report on Southeast Asia, expected to be published in 2024, will provide new evidence-based analysis on the setbacks and progress in achieving gender equality in the region.

Since the publication of the report, business environments have changed for women entrepreneurs in the region, especially due to the disruption and the unprecedented wave of digitalisation spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic. Building on the 2017 Report, the Gender Initiative conducted a survey of women entrepreneurs in ASEAN to:

1. Update existing data on the challenges of women entrepreneurs in conducting and growing their businesses in a post-COVID environment;
2. Develop a more holistic profile of women entrepreneurs across the ASEAN region;
3. Explore specific challenges and opportunities faced by women entrepreneurs surrounding digitalisation and identify needs for support.

Drawing on observations from the survey results and complemented by interviews with relevant stakeholders in the region, this policy brief seeks to contribute to a better understanding of challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in ASEAN. It offers key policy observations to facilitate dialogue among stakeholders on ways to provide better support to women entrepreneurs in the era of digital transformation and promote inclusive growth across Southeast Asia.



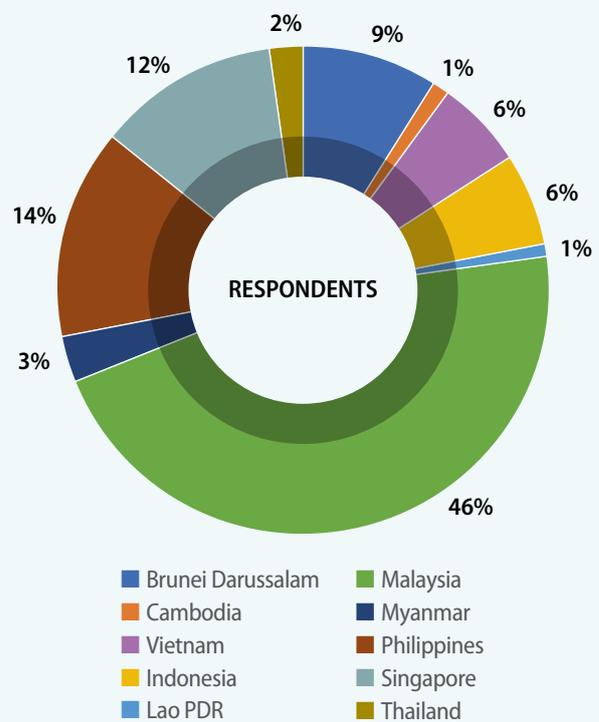


Over 70 million MSMEs in ASEAN
More MSMEs led by women than men

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

The survey consisted of 30 questions divided into the following categories: entrepreneur profile, business characteristics, and digitalisation. It was distributed online to relevant stakeholders through the platform LimeSurvey and made available in English, Vietnamese, Thai, Bahasa Indonesia, and Filipino. Overall, the survey gathered a total of 236 respondents from 10 ASEAN Member Countries. Among the survey respondents, nearly half (46%) are currently based in Malaysia, followed by the Philippines and Singapore at 14% and 12% respectively.

While the survey provides insightful findings into the experiences of women entrepreneurs in ASEAN, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Given that the survey was distributed online and primarily through regional networks that provide support to women entrepreneurs, the sample may not fully represent the diverse demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds of women entrepreneurs across the region. The survey may have limited its reach to those who lack access to Internet or digital devices, gathering respondents who are more technologically adept and/or urban-based, and excluding those who operate, for example, informal or agricultural businesses. The distribution method and sample size may have also favoured responses from certain countries, potentially overrepresenting or



underrepresenting others. Despite these limitations, the survey results provide an updated snapshot of women entrepreneurs' experiences in ASEAN and a valuable starting point in understanding the challenges faced post-pandemic and the role of digital technologies in their businesses.

Women entrepreneurs in ASEAN

It has been widely recognised that greater gender equality improves development outcomes, and that increasing women's participation in the economy benefits communities and society as a whole. In the dynamic and rapidly evolving economic landscape of ASEAN, women entrepreneurs are emerging as a powerful force in driving economic growth and social progress. They account for a significant portion of the region's workforce, contributing to job creation, innovation, and overall economic prosperity. **Compared to the world average, the participation of women in business ownership is greater in Southeast Asia.**¹ Micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) account for 97%-99% of the total establishments in ASEAN, making it over 70 million MSMEs in the region, with more MSMEs led by women than men.² Not only do MSMEs constitute a vast majority of firms in all countries, they also account for mass shares of employment and nearly half of the region's entire GDP.³

Women-owned and led MSMEs contribute to social progress by promoting gender equality and empowering women in communities across the region. These businesses provide women with the opportunity to break free from traditional gender roles, pursue their passions, and achieve financial independence. Not only do they seek to contribute to their own well-being, but they also uplift their families and communities, creating a ripple effect of positive change. Their contributions, often overlooked and underestimated, are shaping the region's trajectory towards a more inclusive and equitable future. Moving forward, these MSMEs will continue to be the engine driving ASEAN's economic

development and growth. Despite their immense potential, however, women entrepreneurs in ASEAN face a multitude of challenges.

Who are the women entrepreneurs in ASEAN?

Women entrepreneurs in ASEAN are a diverse group, with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. Based on the survey results, **the profile of an average woman entrepreneur is between the ages 35-44 (on average, 43) years old, is typically married and has children.** Half of the total number of respondents hold a Bachelor's degree, while 38% have chosen to pursue higher studies at a Master's or PhD level, or taken Vocational Education and Training.⁴

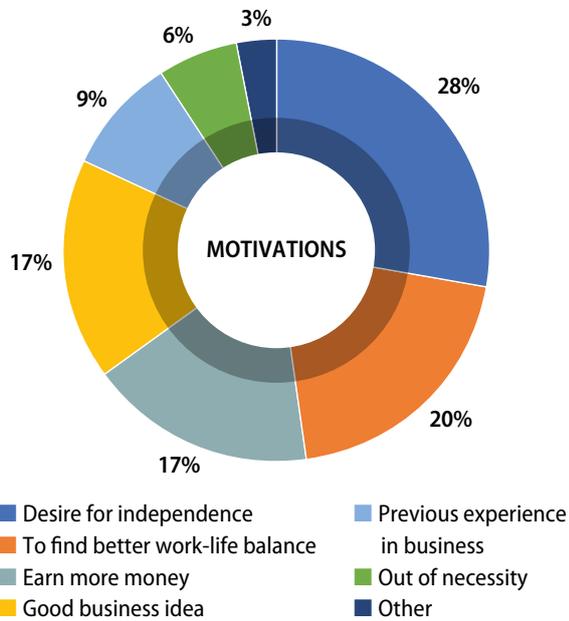
**On average:
43 years old
Married with children
Hold a Bachelor's
degree**

Why did they become entrepreneurs?

Women are motivated to choose an entrepreneurial path for different reasons compared to men. Several studies have revealed that they are more susceptible to be influenced by "push factors" than "pull factors" when venturing into entrepreneurship particularly in emerging and developing economies.⁵ This implies that a higher proportion of women embark on entrepreneurship out of necessity, driven by a lack of alternative options in the labour market.⁶

1. OECD, "Strengthening Women's Entrepreneurship in ASEAN," 2017, https://www.oecd.org/southeast-asia/regional-programme/Strengthening_Womens_Entrepreneurship_ASEAN.pdf.
2. ASEAN, <https://asean.org/our-communities/economic-community/resilient-and-inclusive-asean/development-of-micro-small-and-medium-enterprises-in-asean-msme/>
3. Ibid.
4. This result is likely due to the sample, as Malaysia and Singapore, which represents 58% of respondents, have higher ratios of female enrolment in tertiary education compared to the rest of the region. ASEAN and EU, "The State of Higher Education in Southeast Asia," 2022, https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/The-State-of-Higher-Education-in-Southeast-Asia_11.2022.pdf.
5. OECD, "Enhancing Women's Economic Empowerment through Entrepreneurship and Business Leadership in OECD Countries," 2014, https://www.oecd.org/gender/Enhancing%20Women%20Economic%20Empowerment_Fin_1_Oct_2014.pdf.
6. OECD/European Commission, "The Missing Entrepreneurs 2023: Policies for Inclusive Entrepreneurship and Self-Employment," 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1787/230efc78-en>.

Motivations in starting a business



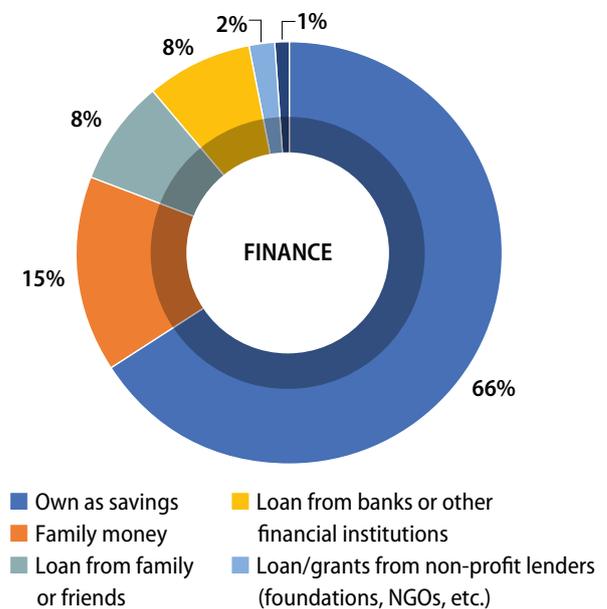
The survey found that women were more likely to start a business pulled by opportunity rather than pushed out of necessity. The primary drivers of their choice to become entrepreneurs are a desire for independence and a better work-life balance, followed by wanting to earn more money and having a good business idea. Most notably, the survey also found that **women are driven by outward-looking goals, highlighting the possibility to make a difference in their communities and help other women entrepreneurs as worthwhile pursuits on their own.**

How did they start their businesses?

A significant portion (66%) of women entrepreneurs relied on their own savings to self-start their business. In addition to personal savings, women entrepreneurs in ASEAN often rely on family money or turn to other relatives and friends for financial support. The other most common sources of financing for women-owned and led MSMEs include loans from financial institutions and other non-profit lenders as well as crowd-funding schemes.

“We have been struggling with financial difficulties following the pandemic, but financing eligibility and criteria are stricter after the pandemic and we could not get financial support from banks or the government. Alternative financing available are giving higher interest rate than ever...it has been tough for businesses to survive now.” – 50-year-old woman entrepreneur from Malaysia

Primary financial capital



In respect to financial support during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to note that given that many of these MSMEs in developing Southeast Asian economies operate in the informal economy, these women entrepreneurs may have had less access to COVID-19 financial relief schemes (i.e. low-interest loans or tax exemptions) which typically require formal business registration.⁷

This reliance on personal and informal financing resources can limit the scale and growth potential of women-owned MSMEs and may be a reflection of the barriers faced to formal financing—underscoring the need for traditional financing channels (i.e. bank loans and venture capital) to be made more accessible to women entrepreneurs.

7. ASEAN and UNESCAP, STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP in National Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Policies and Action Plans, 2022, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FINAL-Policy-Toolkit-Strengthening-Womens-Entrepreneurship-in-MSME.pdf>

What are their businesses like?

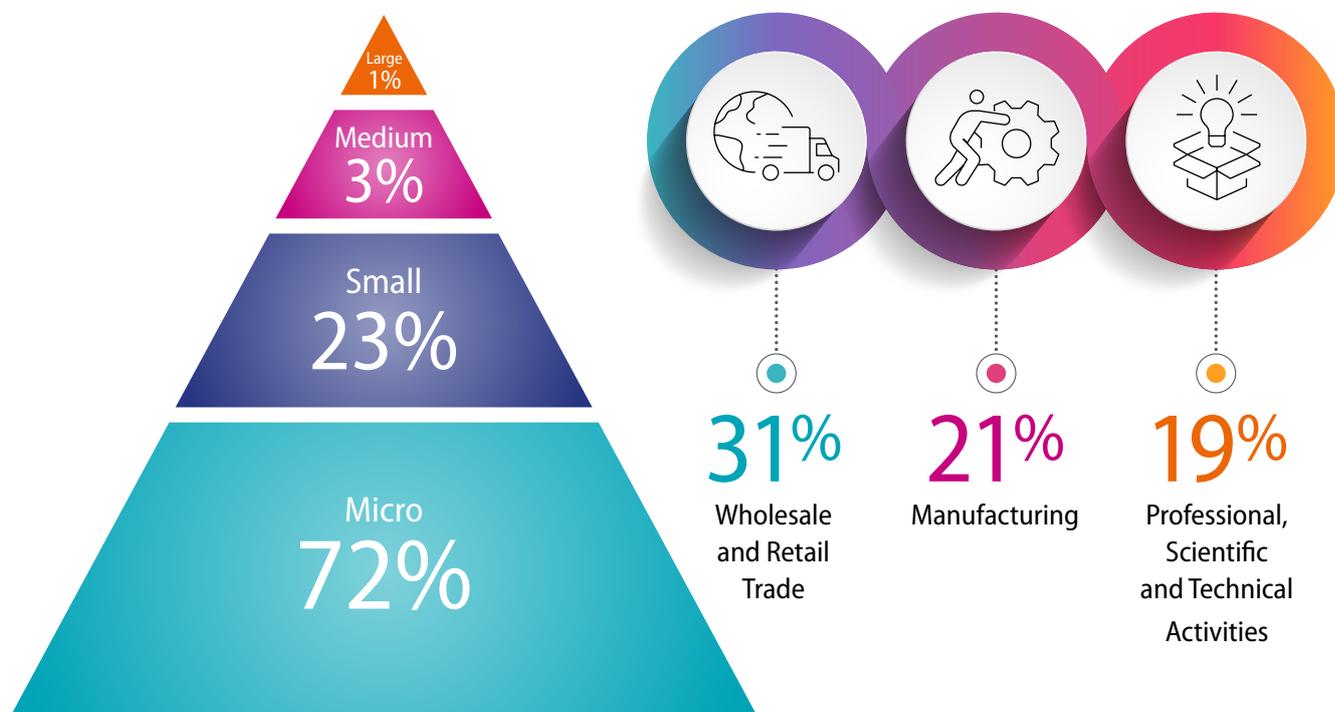
The survey results show that **72% of the respondents are women entrepreneurs operating in micro enterprises, employing fewer than 10 employees or none at all.** Women enterprises are much more likely to be concentrated in this category because of the lower barriers to entry: less capital investment and fewer employees, making it easier to establish and manage. **These women entrepreneurs have been in business for more or less six years, and most of the respondents operate at the local level with only 13% operating regionally and 11% having an international business reach.**

The survey reveals that women entrepreneurs are primarily engaged in wholesale retail and trade (31%) and tend to be employed in manufacturing (21%), and professional, scientific, and technical activities (19%)⁸. Wholesale retail and trade

contributes a significant share of economic activity in the services sector – traditionally a female-dominated industry – accounting for almost half of ASEAN’s entire GDP.⁹ There are 8 out of 10 countries in ASEAN which have grown to be service-driven economies.¹⁰ The high relative concentration of women entrepreneurs in manufacturing is also reflective of the historically large proportion of female workers in the textiles, apparel, and garment industry.

On average:
Working for 6 years
Operating locally

Enhancing productivity in the service sector often poses a greater challenge than in manufacturing industries due to the labour-intensive nature of services and the prevalent face-to-face interactions involved in service delivery. However, services encompass a diverse



8. The International Labour Organization defines professional, scientific, and technical activities as those that involve the application of specialised knowledge and skills in various fields, including science and engineering, health, business and administration, education, and social and cultural services.

9. OECD, "Developing the OECD Services Trade Restrictiveness Index for ASEAN," 2022, <https://www.oecd.org/trade/topics/services-trade/asean-stri/>.

10. ASEAN, "ASEAN Statistical Yearbook," 2022, ASYB_2022.pdf (aseanstats.org).

range of activities, and technological advancements, combined with new business models, have dramatically altered the delivery and structure of services in certain sectors over time. Expanded access to the Internet can revolutionise retail and service industries, empowering MSMEs to enhance their business operations, reach new markets, and introduce new products.

What challenges do women entrepreneurs in ASEAN face?

Despite women's high levels of business-ownership in Southeast Asia, choosing the entrepreneur path does not come without its challenges. Women generally encounter unique obstacles in starting and growing their businesses, such as structural barriers limiting their access to resources and deeply-embedded socio-cultural attitudes and biases that translate to unfavourable policies for women.¹¹ Various studies have identified the common barriers encountered by women entrepreneurs in ASEAN countries. Previously, the most prohibitive barriers identified across all ASEAN countries are the prevalence of traditional social norms that create social pressures and limited access to financing.¹²

The survey suggests **access to capital** remains one of the most pressing challenges, followed by **human resources, and business product development**. These challenges are interconnected and can have a significant impact on the success of women-owned businesses. The **lack of access to capital** is a major barrier to entry for many women entrepreneurs as it can be difficult to secure loans from traditional financial institutions, often due to a lack of collateral or a lack of experience in business. Moreover, in some countries, institutional barriers exist where financial activities are linked to cultural laws. In Indonesia, for example, married women would require spousal consent to request for funding or for critical legal transactions.¹³ As a result, women entrepreneurs end up relying on

“We found that many women have strong potential and great capacity but did not know how to innovate their products without access to the necessary training and financial capital to start their business. At SPARK! Philippines, we begin by addressing these basic challenges on their necessities.” – SPARK! Philippines

personal savings or loans from family and friends – similarly reflected by the survey results—which can limit their ability to invest and grow their enterprises. **Finding the right people to hire** can also be a challenge for women entrepreneurs because they may not have the same networks as men, making it difficult to find qualified employees especially in industries with a high demand for skilled workers. This challenge is compounded by the size of their businesses since smaller enterprises, particularly micro-enterprises, usually have fewer resources and less experience in hiring, managing, and retaining employees. **Developing a business product** presents a challenge for any entrepreneur, but it can be especially daunting for women entrepreneurs. This challenge is often exacerbated for women entrepreneurs due to a combination of factors: limited access to resources and expertise, coupled with potential inexperience in market research and product development. Consequently, women entrepreneurs may need to dedicate more time and resources into developing a competitive and profitable product that successfully addresses market demands.

Women entrepreneurs in ASEAN continue to face barriers when it comes to scaling up their businesses. **Overall, the most challenging aspects of operating and expanding their businesses are reaching a bigger market/expanding the customer base and high operational costs. Reaching a bigger market** is difficult because it can require significant resources and investment to develop and implement marketing strategies to attract new customers. Moreover, MSMEs

11. OECD, “SIGI Global Report: Gender Equality in Times of Crisis,” 2023, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/4607b7c7-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/4607b7c7-en>.

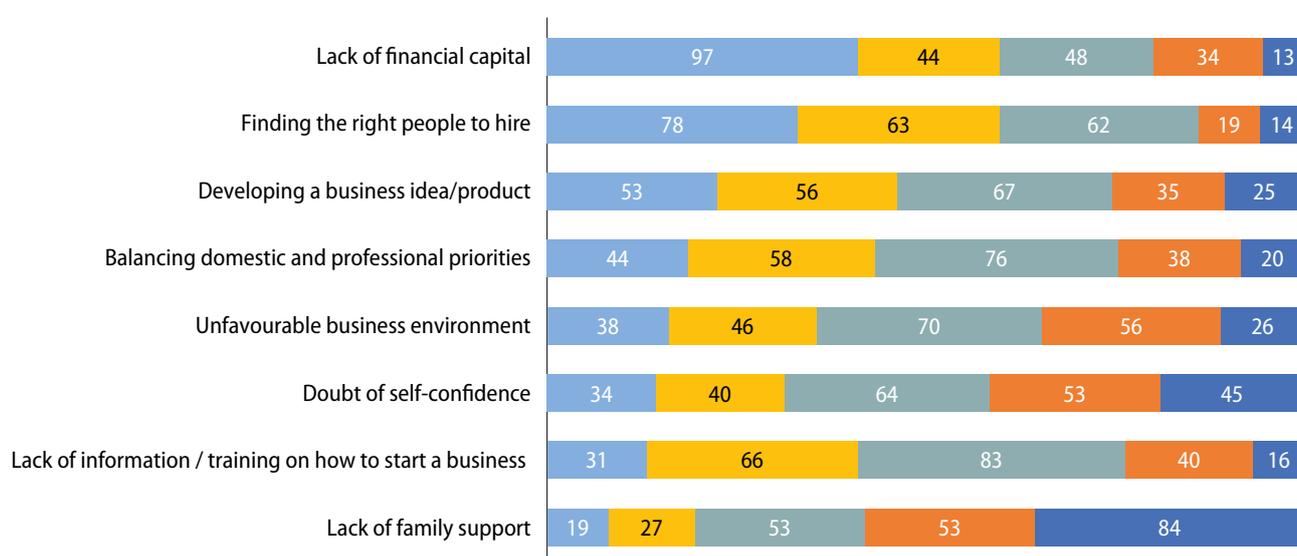
12. OECD, “The Missing Entrepreneurs: Policy Highlights,” 2023, <https://www.oecd.org/cfe/Policy%20highlights%20Missing%20Entrepreneurs%202023%20FIN.pdf>.

13. OECD, “Strengthening Women’s Entrepreneurship in ASEAN,” 2017, https://www.oecd.org/southeast-asia/regional-programme/Strengthening_Womens_Entrepreneurship_ASEAN.pdf.

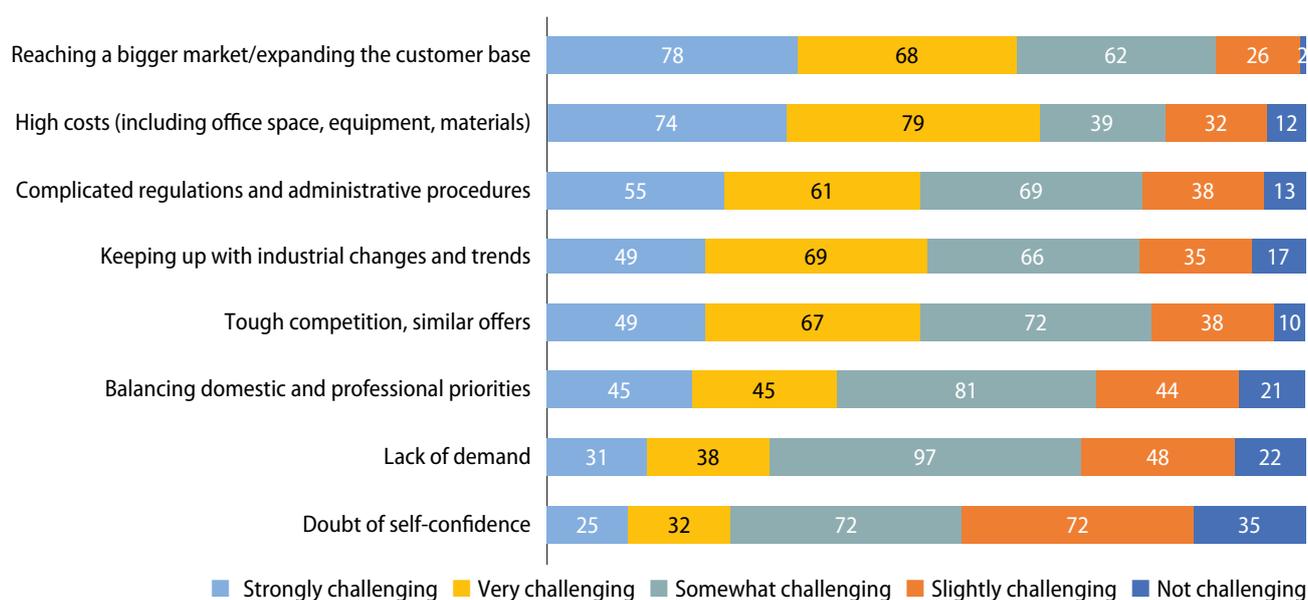
can face competition from other businesses that are already well-established in the market. **High operational costs** are also a challenge for businesses of different sizes given the need to invest in office space, utilities, inventory, and other expenses. The day-to-day operational costs of running a business can pose a significant burden for women entrepreneurs who are disproportionately represented in sectors that are often

characterised by low-profit margins and high operational costs, such as handicrafts, food and beverages, and retail. In many ASEAN countries, underdeveloped infrastructure especially in rural areas make it even more challenging for women entrepreneurs to secure the necessary funding to cover the costs of hiring additional staff, acquiring new equipment, or expanding into new markets.

Challenges in starting their businesses



Challenges in operating/growing their businesses



This data derives from women who started their businesses and does not represent a scoring for women who perhaps wanted to but didn't make it to start a business.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEUR NETWORKS (WENS)

Women entrepreneur networks form an essential institutional support system, but one of the most common challenges to the development of women entrepreneurs is that they typically have less access to such valuable networking opportunities. To address this gap, women entrepreneurs in many countries, including in ASEAN, have formed their own networks and associations to provide networking opportunities and mutual support. **The survey found that 3 out of every 5 people are aware of the existence of these women business networks in their country, and 55% of all total respondents have joined at least one network and continue to participate as members.** With the support from donors and in collaboration with national and local governments, these networks provide capacity building workshops and programmes for women entrepreneurs looking to start their businesses. Most of these WENs thrive on a wide network of partnerships to deliver the substantial support they provide to aspiring and growing women entrepreneurs, whether financial, logistical, professional, social or advocacy support. Growing digitalisation has prompted them to include training on basic digital skills as well as e-marketing and

e-commerce which are rapidly thriving industries across Southeast Asia. They also facilitate access to capital and markets, and networking and knowledge-sharing amongst members.

“In today’s digital age, finding a platform that offers free or affordable training, coaching, and market connection for entrepreneurs is a rare gem. Imagine having a digital business coach by your side, guiding you from the very beginning until you can confidently soar on your own. As a new entrepreneur, it often feels like navigating through trial and error.”

– 54-year-old woman entrepreneur from Malaysia

“We have over 30 thousand members across Indonesia. This number has been steadily increasing which reflects the growing representation of women in Indonesia’s businesses. Most of our members are in their 40-50’s who have a wealth of experience to share, so we would like to expand our reach to younger entrepreneurs to support the culture of startups and the digital revolution that ensued post-pandemic.”

– IWAPI (Indonesian Women Entrepreneurs Association)



“Women entrepreneurs face many interrelated challenges. The digital gap is increasing, so is the gap between micro and bigger entrepreneurs, as well as the impact of socio-cultural norms that widen the gender gap. One gap increases the other, but improving one improves other aspects as well. Aside from helping them navigate their use of digital and financial tools, part of the work that we do beyond women entrepreneurship is educating other entrepreneurs to be gender smart and gender sensitive.”

– SHE Investments, Cambodia

How are they adapting to digitalisation?

Digitalisation played a significant role in Southeast Asia’s resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The region’s strong adoption of digital tools and services has enabled businesses to adapt to new and evolving challenges while creating new opportunities for businesses and individuals alike. Digital technologies are key enablers that facilitate women entrepreneur’s engagement within the wider society and labour market. Survey respondents affirm that the pandemic made it more important for them to use digital tools and services in their operations, and that it accelerated their businesses’ digital transformation. More importantly, businesses who have successfully adopted digitalisation feel better prepared to deal with future challenges and economic disruptions.

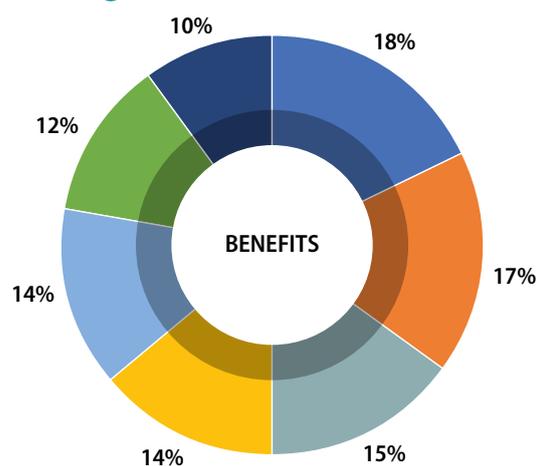
The survey shows that out of 236 respondents, 222 (94%) use digital technology in their businesses

Women entrepreneurs in ASEAN use digital technology in a variety of ways, but the most common reasons are for financial transactions, marketing, and business management. As seen from the chart, this suggests that respondents employ digital technology to streamline their operations, reach new customers, and grow their businesses. Respondents have indicated that the use of digital technology contributes to **improved productivity, customer engagement, and real-time measurement of business activities.**

The survey also found that women entrepreneurs in ASEAN demonstrate a strong inclination towards adopting digital technologies.

Apart from enhancing their business operations, they perceive that use of digital technology gives them a greater sense of confidence and independence in managing their own businesses. Many also feel comfortable in their use of digital tools and services, which can reflect their willingness to embrace digitalisation as a driving force for growth and empowerment. It is interesting to note

Use of digital tools and services



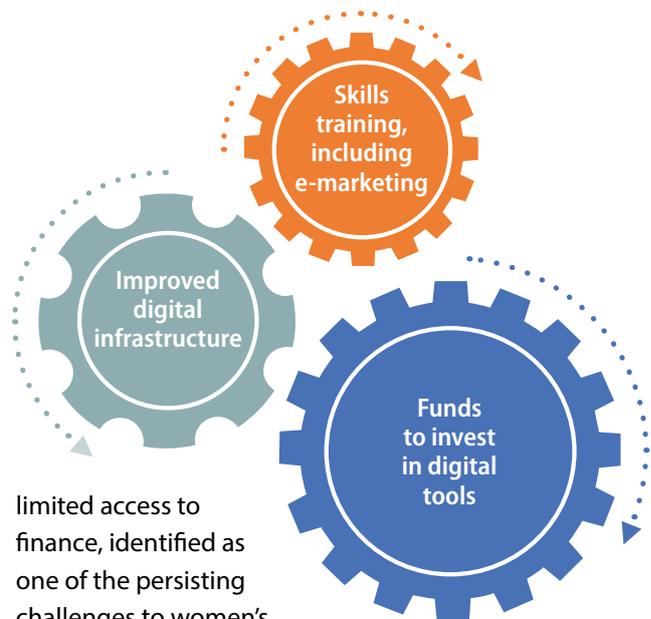
- Financial transactions (Online banking, payments)
- Marketing (Promoting goods and services online)
- Business management (Financial management, accounting, human resource management)
- Business research (Finding information online)
- Buying or selling goods and services online
- Customer support (Talking to customers)
- Delivery of goods and services

that **those who pursued technical and vocational training tend to exhibit greater confidence and comfort with digital tools and services than those with higher academic degrees.** This highlights the importance of providing hands-on skills training to equip women entrepreneurs with the necessary skills to navigate today’s rapidly evolving digital landscape.

The advantages of digitalisation, however, have yet to be fully harnessed by women entrepreneurs across ASEAN. **The 14 out of 236 respondents (6%) who do not use digital technology in their businesses, cited lack of digital information and skills, and limited resources as their main reasons.** This suggests that women entrepreneurs who lack information and skills about digital technologies are less likely to seek out financing and channel resources to invest in digitalising their enterprises. This, in turn, can limit their access to financing and resources, further perpetuating the digital divide, hindering their economic growth and underscoring the need for targeted interventions.

Furthermore, respondents perceive that significant barriers remain to fully harness the benefits of digital technology. These challenges can be broadly categorised into three main areas: **financial constraints, digital infrastructure, and digital literacy.**

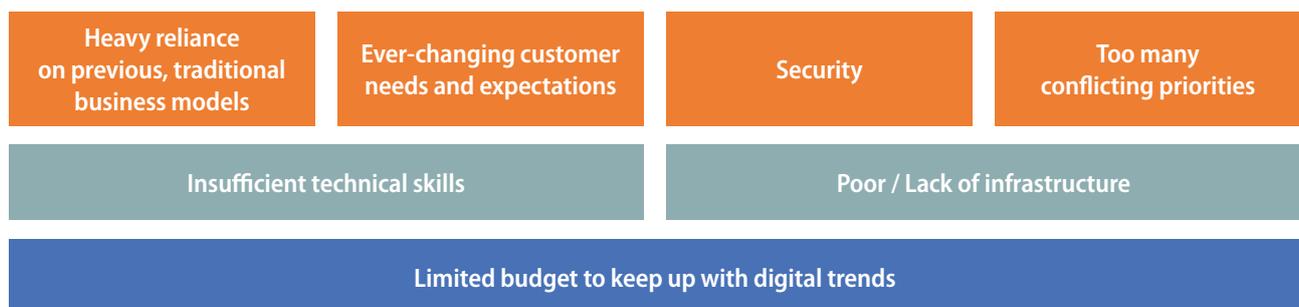
While digital technologies can serve as cost-effective tools to help reduce the operational costs of running a business, the **high cost of acquiring such technologies serves as a barrier in itself.** Women’s



limited access to finance, identified as one of the persisting challenges to women’s entrepreneurship development in ASEAN countries, makes acquiring technology, accessing Internet connectivity, and pursuing digital literacy training an even more challenging endeavour beyond women’s financial reach. **Poor infrastructure** (or the lack of) further makes costly digital tools and services less accessible, especially for women living in rural areas. Lastly, the **digital literacy gap** persists across ASEAN where women feel they lack the skills and knowledge to make the most out of their use of digital technologies.

The survey suggests **that women entrepreneurs in ASEAN need a combination of financial support, infrastructure investment, and skills training to successfully digitalise their operations.** Targeted interventions are needed at all policy levels to support women entrepreneurs build their assets—whether social, financial, or digital. If MSMEs are the backbone of the region’s economy, and the majority of which are led by women¹⁴, then promoting women’s entrepreneurship and their inclusion in the digital economy is thus both a significant means and an end.

Barriers to fully harness the benefits of digital technology



14. ERIA, “ASEAN Women Entrepreneurs are Key for the Post-pandemic Recovery”, 2022, <https://www.eria.org/news-and-views/asean-women-entrepreneurs-are-key-for-the-post-pandemic-recovery/>

What can policymakers do better to support women entrepreneurs in ASEAN?

- **Take further steps to facilitate access to finance**
 - **Establish dedicated financing windows for women and develop women-centric loan products.** For example, working with financial institutions to introduce preferential schemes for women such as interest-free loans, extended credit guarantee coverage, flexible repayment tenures, relaxed collateral requirements, and a combination of term and working capital loans to provide both short and long-term support.
 - **Promote alternative financing mechanisms and platforms.** Support the development of alternative financing options for women entrepreneurs, such as crowdfunding platforms, angel investor networks, and peer-to-peer lending platforms. Encouraging conventional financial institutions to collaborate with these platforms can provide easier access to capital and financing opportunities for women-led businesses. These efforts should integrate capacity-building components such as financial literacy and education to assist women entrepreneurs in making informed financial choices.
- **Strengthen and leverage women entrepreneur networks (WENs)**
 - **Formally integrate women entrepreneur networks into policymaking processes and identify them as partners in shaping national development plans.** Stronger collaboration between WENs and government agencies can include providing financial and technical support to develop their organisational capacity and expand their reach, as well as establishing regular dialogue and consultation mechanisms between them to identify and address the dynamic needs of women entrepreneurs.
 - **Support research and data collection on women entrepreneurs through WENs.** These networks often operate in local and national chapters where they are able to collect first-hand data on the experiences of women entrepreneurs in ASEAN on the ground. Investing in sex-disaggregated and intersectional research and data collection efforts to gather comprehensive data on the status of women entrepreneurship in ASEAN can help identify emerging trends and inform evidence-based policymaking in the region.
- **Promote multistakeholder partnerships with WENs to build a supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem for women entrepreneurs.** For example, partnerships between WENs and industry associations, chambers of commerce, and corporations can help facilitate access to mentorship, networking opportunities, and business development support. Academic partnerships with universities and research institutions promote knowledge transfer, innovation, financial and digital literacy. Financial institutions can also benefit from WENs' insights to tailor financial services for women entrepreneurs and can also facilitate access to credit, loans, and other financial services.
- **Invest in digitalising women-owned and led MSMEs**
 - **Invest in digital infrastructure and digital skills.** Expanding access to affordable and reliable digital infrastructure across ASEAN provides women entrepreneurs with equal opportunities to participate in the digital economy. Such access must be complemented by improving digital literacy and awareness through trainings and workshops which allows them to maximise their use of digital technologies and build their capacities by equipping them with the necessary skills to use these to their advantage.
 - **Support women-led startups in digital sectors.** Fostering digital entrepreneurship is a way to address the underrepresentation of women entrepreneurs in ICT-related industries and encourage women to diversify their talents. Establishing digital innovation hubs specifically catering to women, as well as targeted funding, incubation, and accelerator programs for women-led startups in key digital sectors such as e-commerce, fintech, and edtech can effectively incentivise more women to embrace digital entrepreneurship and venture into new and promising fields.

– **Expand access to digital financial services.**

Even though women have less access to traditional financial services, they tend to adopt digital financial solutions more than men. Tailoring innovative digital financial products and services to the needs of women entrepreneurs can improve access to meet their financial needs. This includes mobile banking, fintech, e-wallets, microloans, and other digital payment platforms.

As digitalisation continues to evolve and permeate various aspects of businesses, policymakers in ASEAN should continue to create a supportive policy environment that empowers women entrepreneurs to effectively navigate and thrive in the digital economy. The findings from this survey can serve as a basis for more in-depth research and discussions aimed at expanding women's economic participation in Southeast Asia and making the region's digital economy an inclusive one.

Useful tools and resources

OECD/EU Better Entrepreneurship Policy Toolkit



The Better Entrepreneurship Policy Tool is a free online self-assessment and learning tool targeted towards policy makers and non-government stakeholders who are working to develop inclusive and social entrepreneurship policies and programmes. It includes self-assessment questionnaires that provide a framework for reflecting on the inclusive and social entrepreneurship policies and programmes in a city, region or country, and policy guidance notes and inspiring case studies to support better policy design, including on improving access to finance. Moreover, it includes a self-assessment tool that specifically targets women entrepreneurship. It aims to inform policies that support women entrepreneurs by providing scores across different modules that explore their skills and capacities, networks, access to finance, business networks and the overall structural and cultural environment in which they operate.

To learn more: <https://betterentrepreneurship.eu/>

OECD Going Digital Toolkit

The OECD Going Digital Toolkit is a valuable and comprehensive resource for policymakers who are working to create a more inclusive and equitable digital economy. It helps countries measure, compare, and find policy solutions to the challenges and



opportunities of the digital transformation. It includes indicators, policy guidance, and related publications on a wide range of topics, including digital infrastructure, skills, entrepreneurship, and data governance. The toolkit also includes a number of resources that are specifically designed to support women entrepreneurs, such as a guide to measuring the gender digital divide, case studies on successful policies and programs to promote women's digital entrepreneurship, and a toolkit for designing and implementing gender-sensitive digital entrepreneurship programs.

To learn more: <https://goingdigital.oecd.org/>

ASEAN Access

ASEAN Access is a one-stop business information and matching gateway for international-oriented businesses to expand their market reach within the ASEAN region and beyond. It aims to provide demand-driven information and services for internationally-oriented SMEs to support them in cross-border trade. It is a flagship initiative of the ASEAN Coordinating Committee on Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (ACCMSME), spearheaded by the Office of SMEs Promotion (OSMEP), Thailand, and supported by the Federal Government of Germany and the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ). Its latest feature, ASEAN Access LEARN, offers virtual training courses specially designed for MSMEs to support them through online training courses on topics such as business planning, marketing, finance,



and e-commerce. The courses are available in English and the national languages of ASEAN countries.

To learn more: <https://www.aseanaccess.com/>

OECD Missing Entrepreneurs Series

This series of biennial reports examines how government policies can release untapped entrepreneurial potential from under-represented parts of the population of impactful entrepreneurs, including women, youth, seniors, the unemployed, immigrants and people with disabilities. It offers comparative data on the



entrepreneurship activities and the barriers faced by each group across OECD and European Union countries. The 2023 edition takes a deep dive into the effectiveness of youth entrepreneurship schemes and the design of welfare bridge schemes for business creation by job seekers. It also contains country profiles for each of the 27 EU Member States showing the major recent trends in diversity in entrepreneurship and the current state and evolution of policy for each country.

Find the latest edition: *The Missing Entrepreneurs 2023 : Policies for Inclusive Entrepreneurship and Self-Employment* | *The Missing Entrepreneurs* | OECD iLibrary (oecd-ilibrary.org)

IWAPI (Indonesian Women Entrepreneurs Association)

is the largest business circle for women in Indonesia which has been operating since 1975 and the first one to specifically support women entrepreneurs. Active across 34 provinces in Indonesia with over 30 000 members, IWAPI supports and encourages its membership through advocacy work, training, mentorship, trade bazaars, business development, funding and networking. The association is open for any woman who owns, co-owns, or holds a significant leadership role in their business. Most members operate micro and small enterprises representing a diverse array of industries with a strong presence in their regional chapters. IWAPI also plays a strong policy and advocacy role by engaging in ASEAN policy forums and collaborating on women entrepreneurship projects across Southeast Asia, extending their impact from the local to the international level.



and local organisations, community groups, and government to design and deliver business training and other support services for women around Cambodia where large parts of the population live in non-urban areas. SHE Investments offers one-one-one coaching, trainings on leadership and team management, and basic digital and financial literacy programs for women who have shown a commitment to their businesses and aspire to grow them into larger, sustainable, and impactful enterprises.

SPARK! Philippines or Samahan ng mga Pilipina para sa Reporma at



Samahan ng mga Pilipina para sa Reporma at Kaunlaran

Kaunlaran is a Philippine NGO composed of empowered women and women champions committed to the development of women and women's organisations as full partners in national development. They work on a range of cross-cutting issues to economically empower different groups of women most especially low-income and marginalised women, but also those living in far-flung areas, the urban poor, former rebels, women farmers, persons deprived of liberty, women part of the LGBTQI+ community, and victims of gender-based violence. SPARK! provides capacity-building for women entrepreneurs and facilitates their access to a bigger market. Its partners, mostly diplomatic missions in the Philippines, determine a priority area or group of focus and the organisation goes where it is needed in the country.

SHE Investments is a social enterprise supporting micro-small women entrepreneurs to scale and formalise their businesses. It is the first and only culturally-tailored gender-focused incubator and accelerator program in Cambodia. Operating as a not-for-profit beyond Phnom Penh, SHE Investments partners with international



CONCLUSION – Empowering Women Entrepreneurs in ASEAN: Addressing Challenges, Embracing Opportunities

Despite global headwinds, ASEAN economies have experienced rapid economic growth over the years. Micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) continue to be the backbone of the region's economy with mostly women at the forefront. While the region has made considerable gains in women's economic participation, women still face a range of visible and subtle barriers that limit the full realisation of their entrepreneurial potential. Given ASEAN's growing digital economy, these barriers are reproduced—even to a greater extent—in women's access and use of digital tools and services.

Digitalisation plays a crucial role in lowering the barriers to women's entrepreneurship in ASEAN. More importantly, it is key to empowering women entrepreneurs and expanding their economic opportunities. Digitalisation holds a strong potential to empower women entrepreneurs, not only economically but also in other aspects of their lives—enabling them to take charge in shaping the future they want.

Women entrepreneurs' access to these digital technologies, and their agency and capacity to leverage

them, can revolutionise how they operate their businesses by providing innovative solutions to enhance productivity and expand their networks. Through digital tools and services, women entrepreneurs are becoming more productive, competitive, and empowered, contributing to their economic well-being and the overall growth of the ASEAN economy.

As digitalisation continues to evolve and permeate various aspects of businesses, policymakers in Southeast Asia should continue to create a supportive policy environment that empowers women entrepreneurs to effectively navigate and thrive in the digital economy.



For more information:

 Southeast.Asia@oecd.org

 <https://www.oecd.org/southeast-asia/>

 @OECD Global

 OECD-OCDE



OECD Southeast Asia
Regional Programme

© OECD 2024