

Embrace Equity: Empowering Women for Cross-Border and Fair Business in ASEAN

“During the pandemic, I found myself struggling to secure clients and retain our own staff.” - Ms Chanleakhena Sophat, Lawyer and Entrepreneur, Cambodia

Ms Sophat is certainly not the only one. Her remarks aptly underscore the challenges many entrepreneurs, particularly women, encounter even beyond the pandemic.

While an estimated 60 million businesses in the ASEAN region are led or owned by women, significant obstacles persist for them to start and sustain their operations: From overcoming legal or administrative hurdles to societal norms and traditional notions – women entrepreneurs need to exhibit a high level of ambition and persistence, not least in the face of additional family obligations and household responsibilities.

Such multiple burdens can leave them confined to the informal sector or less lucrative segments. Ultimately, this compounds their vulnerability, undermining their potential as **drivers for economic development and trade**.

MSMEs and Women Entrepreneurs as an Emerging Force

Governments in ASEAN acknowledge the need to boost and bolster the resilience and competitiveness of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs).

Making up more than 90% of businesses in most ASEAN economies, MSMEs present crucial employment opportunities, particularly for women. Key measures are aimed at improving participation in international value and supply chains by facilitating access to capital, support mechanisms, networks, and new markets.

While putting a strain on many entrepreneurial endeavours, the COVID-19 pandemic also spurred innovative business initiatives, notably in the evolving digital economy. Women’s economic power and participation is on the rise in the *Sheconomy* where they play a pivotal role as entrepreneurs, influencers, and multipliers.

On their own, however, women entrepreneurs in ASEAN often struggle to break gender biases and other barriers in a male-dominated business world. This is quite evident in numerous business associations, including among young entrepreneurs, where a greater balance between male and female members has yet to be achieved.

Representation and recognition matter as much as concrete support offers. Women entrepreneur associations provide a solution for women to support other women, as Ms Sophat attests:

I decided to become more involved in the work of the Cambodian Women Entrepreneurs Association (CWEA), to build partnerships and mentor other women who are in a similar position.

Shining a Light on Women Entrepreneurs in Cross-Border Trade

Launched in 2021, [ASEAN Access](#) is the one-stop business gateway to market opportunities in the region. The platform caters to the specific needs of MSMEs at the stage of internationalization and currently boasts more than 3,000 members as well as over 360 registered service providers.

As ASEAN Access relies on the demand and contributions for activities from an extended network of public and private partners, publicity-

related efforts are critical to make the platform more widely known and used.

ASEAN Member States have therefore formally nominated **ASEAN Access Ambassadors (AAA)** to help promote the platform in their respective networks. Being members of the business community, the AAAs not only mobilize new members, but also actively initiate market talks and matchmaking events.



Perhaps unsurprisingly, all the current and prospective AAAs to date are women. Even though it is a *pro bono* position, AAAs themselves immensely benefit from increased exposure which supports their own business aspirations – something that Ms Sophat acknowledges should not be underestimated:

Becoming an ASEAN Access Ambassador allows me to link up with entrepreneurs in various ASEAN countries, not only women – and it has expanded my business network.

In order for women entrepreneurs in ASEAN to gain **access to resources** and claim their rightful place within the business community, they need to literally go out of their way: Visibility and exposure are indispensable in enabling women entrepreneurs to branch out and expand their businesses.

Moreover, in the spirit of “if you can see it, you can be it”, AAAs like Ms Sophat act as positive role models, motivating other women

entrepreneurs to conquer their fears and follow suit.

Stepping Up as Business and Consumer Champions

Yet Ms Sophat is not only advancing her own entrepreneurial journey through her leadership and ambassadorial role as part of the ASEAN Access network. She is also keen to raise broader awareness about ethical and fair business conduct.

Women in many ASEAN countries continue to make vital purchasing decisions for the members of their households. On the one hand, this means they are well suited to be consumer champions, given their ability to influence others and in driving smarter or more sustainable consumption practices. On the other hand, this renders them more susceptible to being misled, defrauded, or harmed by irresponsible companies – be it in the food, finance, or healthcare sectors.

Female consumers, more so than men, are prone to falling victim to aggressive, even sexually exploitative tactics. One of the areas where this can be seen is online lending, a common practice in ASEAN countries that has been popularized owing to the widespread use of social media by informal providers.

As a lawyer, businesswoman and mother herself, Ms Sophat knows how important it is that women are educated and empowered about their **rights** as consumers. She is primarily concerned by the rampant sale of unsafe cosmetic products, mostly online, and other types of scams.

Her home country, Cambodia, possesses the youngest consumer protection regime in the region. The consumer protection law was only enacted in 2019, and a formal consumer association has not been established yet. There is an urgency to bring together consumer advocates to alert the public and provide advice or assistance.

Ms Sophat therefore wants to do more to reach out and help others not only on the business, but also on the consumer side:

In addition to being legal professionals, we are engaged in a number of social projects and interested in forming a consumer association so we can educate and empower especially women.

Fair Conduct as a Business and Economic Imperative

There is considerable merit in interlinking efforts on MSME promotion, women's economic empowerment and consumer protection. Ms Sophat is eager to learn from the experiences in other countries, such as Indonesia, where the first and largest consumer association was founded by women a mere 50 years ago.

She is also considering, to some extent, to replicate an innovative pilot aimed at strengthening entrepreneurial skills, digital literacy, and the understanding of rural women about fair business conduct, in an **integrated approach**.

In 2022, GIZ in cooperation with a village cooperative and consumer group supported practical trainings to enhance the independence and readiness of women to sell on e-commerce platforms and increase their small incomes. Participants were guided in the dos and don'ts of marketing their products – for example how not to mislead consumers, respond to complaints etc.

This follows the rationale that more confident and trusted businesses, regardless of their size and sector, are in a better position to enlarge their customer base.

Fair and responsible business conduct drives trust which, in turn, drives transactions and markets. Sustainable economic development thus is inextricably intertwined with the consumer protection agenda.



In other words: Fair practices in compliance with consumer protection laws should not be considered a burden, but beneficial for businesses and the economy as a whole.

The pilot activity is illustrative of this on a grassroots level. Beyond that, it is indicative of the importance of private sector promotion without losing sight of fairness, transparency, and inclusivity.

The latter not only echo core consumer protection principles, but also speak to the significance of **breaking barriers and biases** that often stand in the way of **women as business and consumer champions** – also in the ASEAN region.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) is a regional grouping of ten Member States, including Cambodia, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Within the framework of projects on Regional Economic Integration in ASEAN, GIZ is implementing selected activities in an integrated approach to foster learning and cooperation among different partners within and across countries, also beyond project boundaries.

Gender-sensitive consumer protection and cross-border SME promotion fall under the ASEAN SME and PROTECT projects, commissioned by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Photo © GIZ/PROTECT + GIZ/ASEAN SME

*Contact: Sita Zimpel, Project Director (GIZ Vietnam)
Contributors: Fitra Aidiella, Alhayyu Shafira Wahyu Putri (GIZ Indonesia), Daren Kong (GIZ Cambodia)*