



# YOUTH, WOMEN AND SOFT POWER IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

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# The decade of action



The year 2020 was meant to herald the decade of action for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and a golden opportunity for South East Asia to “come good” on their commitment to sustainable development, gender equality, climate change, youth justice and more. Yet, months into the decade, the pandemic has developed deeply unequally.

Incidental improvements in air quality and other environmental measures aside, the effects of the global economic downturn have wrought havoc across South East Asia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It has delivered particularly damaging blows to youth and women, and has resulted in a soft power challenge that many nations are struggling to effectively manage.

The health ramifications of COVID-19 in a region often under-developed, under-resourced and under the poverty line are already considerable enough. Yet, recovery will demand even more of South East Asia—and require significant antifragility in order to prosper in the future.

## Antifragility in South East Asia

Antifragility is a concept with economic origins developed by Nassim Nicholas Taleb to refer to systems that increase in their capability to thrive as a result of stressors, shocks, volatility, uncertainty, mistakes, attacks or failures.<sup>1</sup> By definition, antifragility goes beyond a nation, organisation or person’s robustness and resilience to describe things that gain from disorder. It is infinitely applicable to South East Asia’s recovery from COVID-19, in which mass disruption and social and economic distress represents a strong opportunity to not just bounce back from COVID-19, but bounce forwards into a new era of impact in the world. The opportunity to achieve SDG targets and more—than address the challenges and grievances faced by all—but particularly women and youth—is particularly accessible for those nations that are nimble and game enough.



# Pre-COVID: the status of youth and women in South East Asia

Youth and women were the two biggest groups in ASEAN for whom this decade meant progress. Instead, 2020 has brought considerable uncertainty and challenges. The majority of the world's youth population reside in greater Asia, with over 213 million youth in ASEAN alone.<sup>2</sup> More than 50 per cent of the population is under 30 years of age, and almost half the population of South East Asia are women.

Prior to COVID-19, gender equality and the meaningful inclusion of youth in political and economic processes had remained elusive and at times a distinct struggle for the region. While young people are highly entrepreneurial, for example in places like Indonesia being part of massive, millions-strong collectives of youth entrepreneurs, they remain excluded from political decision-making and marginalised even within youth-focused forums. For instance, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Voices of the Future body, dedicated to fostering youth and next generation leadership, is led almost entirely by old men,<sup>3</sup> with not a single woman nor young person in sight. Gatekeeping and a process of "token" inclusion frequently dominates inter-regional and in-country bodies, with youth rarely given access and power at the same time. Gender equality was also an issue. In fact, in 2020 the World Economic Forum estimated it would take 163 years for East Asia and the Pacific to attain gender parity,<sup>4</sup> with the region having made some of the least progress on

gender equality in the world.

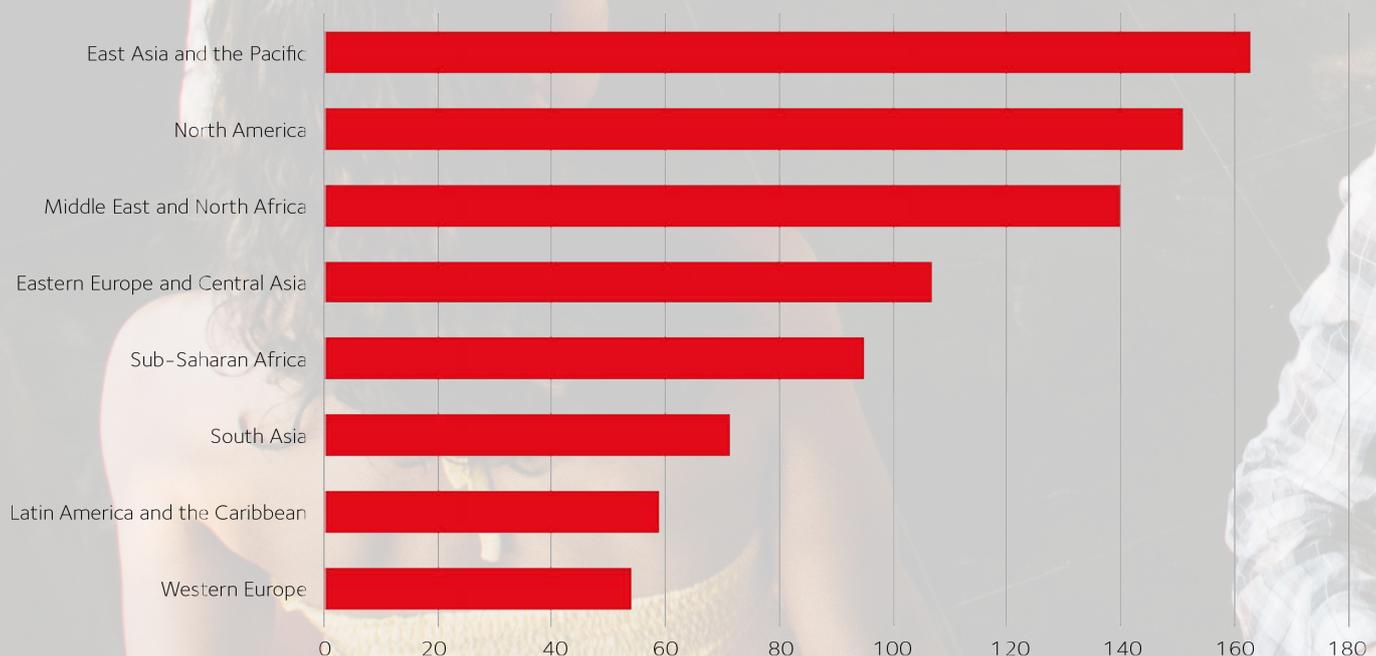
The report found that women remain ingrained in poverty and face lower economic opportunities.<sup>6</sup> Women-owned small and medium enterprises (SMEs) were often smaller in scale, scope, and profit than those owned by men. Additionally, such enterprises were often at the micro level or involved in the informal sector. Women were also more affected by natural disasters, violence, and a lack or low quality of education.<sup>7</sup>

For policy-makers across ASEAN and its near neighbours, these inequalities should be ringing alarm bells. Greater domestic violence is correlated with greater interstate violence.<sup>8</sup> Unrepresentative decision-making affects the durability and strength of peace and resolution processes.

The global economy could experience up to a \$5 trillion increase if female entrepreneurs were supported as much as male entrepreneurs.<sup>9</sup>

And, let us not forget that the actions and inactions of governments towards their most vulnerable have severe ramifications—not just on individuals and communities, but on governments' international soft power, ability to influence, and progress on the SDGs long into the future.

**Figure 1: Years until gender parity will be achieved\***



\*based on current trajectories.<sup>5</sup>



SALE  
1-300000  
2-500000

BIKINI  
SALE

TOP

# COVID-19 fragility for marginalised groups



COVID-19 has exacerbated many of these underlying inequalities. Those on the frontline are most likely to be women. Those dominating insecure, informal, part-time and casual work are mostly women and young people. Those whom will be most affected in the long term by COVID-19 responses and recovery, are the next generation, whose rights and opportunities are being sold out from underneath them. On the surface, fragility and marginalisation dominate the experiences of women and young people.

In employment, South East Asian women are more likely to be engaged in uncontracted work across food, hospitality, essential domestic work, and manufacturing.<sup>10</sup> While government bailouts assist many small-and medium-sized businesses, unregistered firms and informal workers within registered firms are largely excluded from statistics and formalised support channels, and as a result remain largely unreachable by crisis welfare support too.<sup>11</sup> Often by circumstance, many of these women also work and live in cramped accommodation, making unfavourable conditions for social distancing and healthy practices.<sup>12</sup>

Medical facilities are also an issue. The services that women would need to rely on should they get sick are often subpar or inaccessible. There are a range of reasons behind this, such as political and religious ones in the case of ethnic Rohingya in Myanmar and physical in the case of rural or disabled women across the region more broadly. In remote areas, medical facilities are additionally at the mercy of nature, from localised flooding to tsunamis and other natural disasters, with many roads still dirt and facilities often at a considerable distance. Tropical Cyclone Harold in the Pacific highlighted some of these competing issues at the intersection of COVID-19 and the environment. Added to these issues, women represent 79 per cent of nurses in South East Asia,<sup>13</sup> placing their lives at the forefront of risk in sub-optimal circumstances.

For many across South East Asia, forced isolation has also exacerbated issues of violence and safety. Within the first few months in Thailand, the numbers of women attending walk-in domestic violence clinics doubled. In Malaysia, one domestic violence hotline reported a 57 per cent increase in calls.<sup>14</sup> Across South East Asia, calls to helplines also skyrocketed, but safe access to support services is not always guaranteed, as lockdown policies have also reduced women's abilities to safely access services without raising the suspicion of their violent perpetrators. Moreover, in some countries, such domestic violence support services were initially not considered essential services, hampering women's access.

# Core challenges summary

## Safety

- 79% of nurses on the frontline are women.
- Domestic violence across South East Asia has increased with the pandemic, including a 57% increase in calls to domestic violence support services in Malaysia and reported threefold increase in reported cases in Indonesia.
- Hospitals and medical facilities frequently under-funded, under-resourced and limited in quality care.

## Political participation

- Out of 30 countries internationally, the majority of national-level committees established to respond to COVID-19 do not have equal gender representation, including across South East Asia.
- Women in conflict-affected settings, such as Myanmar, are increasingly marginalised by the pandemic which has strengthened some gender norms and gendered practices.
- Women's representation remains limited in leadership roles.

## Economic empowerment

- An estimated third of garment factories in Cambodia have shut and almost 60,000 garment workers in Myanmar let go—both countries where women form the majority of garment workers.
- In April, Cambodia disqualified all informal enterprises—which make up 95% of Cambodian SMEs—from government relief.
- Women predominate in informal enterprises.

## Education

- The top two challenges for youth in accessing education and remote work across ASEAN included weak internet quality and high internet costs.
- Access to quality online teaching environments is not always possible due to university and education funding and resource constraints.

Data source: UNESCAP,<sup>15</sup> CARE International,<sup>16</sup> World Economic Forum.<sup>17</sup>

Intersectionality underpins women's experiences. Gender, ethnicity, race, visa status, (dis)ability, sexuality, class, religion and age all affect the challenges brought by COVID-19. In fact, migrant domestic workers are amongst the 'single most disregarded segment of workers' across Asia, facing disproportionately high rates of physical and sexual violence.<sup>18</sup> Women from the Philippines and Indonesia are chief providers of domestic workers and caretakers in Hong Kong and other nations in the region. Yet, travel restrictions and economic downturn have resulted in significant job losses, withheld income and violence for those already in precarious legal, economic and social positions. The Indonesian Migrant Workers Union, for example, has reported dozens of undue dismissals and wage theft as employers can no longer afford domestic workers or are afraid workers will carry the virus.<sup>19</sup>

Youth face additional challenges. While many young people do not have to earn a living to support their family, some do, and are affected by the same employment and entrepreneurship challenges experienced more widely. Young people are also more likely to still be in education, not have families and children of their own, and not have the same pressing survival challenges that their parents and women generally may face. Yet, challenges remain. Forgetting for a

minute the existential crisis most young people are enduring right now as a result of anthropogenic climate change and some of the largest intergenerational inequalities on record,<sup>20</sup> the effects of COVID-19 (like any largescale trauma) will likely be around for the rest of their lives.

ASEAN youth are adjusting to the challenges this brings: significantly increasing their digital footprint and strengthening their growth mindset, entrepreneurial uptake, resilience and adaptability.

However, a lack of digital skills and inadequacy and unavailability of quality and affordable internet connection do present barriers, particularly for those still studying or facing the challenge of remote work. The World Economic Forum found that a lack of appropriate digital infrastructure and skills particularly affected ASEAN young people in education, agriculture, the gig economy, and SMEs, for whom remotely working was significantly difficult or impossible.<sup>21</sup> Further, the lack of available funding for young entrepreneurs put those at the coalface of national innovation at substantial risk—damaging nations' long-term growth and adaptability and potentially losing a generation of entrepreneurs in one fell swoop.<sup>22</sup>

# Progress on the SDGs

When COVID-19 emerged in early 2020, South East Asia was already not on track to achieve the SDGs by 2030, lagging behind in all but two of the 17 Goals—Goal 4: Quality Education and Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure. The least progress has been made on Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities and Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, which has worrying implications for women and youth. Additionally, recognised as a “gendered”

pandemic, COVID-19 is pitched to further set back goals such as Goal 5: Gender Equality, Goal 3: Good Health and Well-Being, and Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth. It is also likely that progress made on other goals is hampered by the redirection of attention and funding away from some crucial long-term goals, to more immediate objectives centred around recovery.<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 2: South East Asia SDG Progress 2020**



Data source: UNESCAP, 2020.<sup>23</sup>

# Soft power implications for nations

South East Asian nations' handling of the gendered and next generational challenges wrought by COVID-19 are increasingly in the spotlight. Some nations have been blessed by relative isolation and pro-active policy-making, and others cursed by slow, narrow, gendered, at times racist and ageist decision-making. All have effects on individuals and communities. However, they also have an effect on a country's soft power at the international level, which goes beyond the individual and has considerable effects on South East Asia's future international standing and trajectory.

Soft power is the art of influencing others without using material, "hard" power or force. In a pre-COVID world, the soft power marketplace was crowded—with diplomacy, music, art, literature, movies, and political stances on global public affairs that all informed how populations viewed nations in the global arena. Some nations in the Asia Pacific region have long held strong reserves of soft power: Japan as a food, culture and technology capital of the world; Korean K-Pop, fashion and beauty informing international trends; and swathes of South East Asia resplendent in natural beauty and the soft power that comes with being an #instagrammable hotspot to influencers worldwide.

Soft power therefore might be seen as a form of capital—cultural or social—that countries are able to harness to influence, impact, and “buy” the minds of citizens globally. It is related to a country's international standing but has a little more “oomph” to it: soft power actively influences others.

COVID-19 has seen a determinedly internal shift with many nations' treatment of their own citizens (rather than a focus on external influencing) reflecting their international standing and soft power. New Zealand's handling of the pandemic—in which the country recently announced it had eradicated the disease after a very humanised and compassionate handling of the emergency—says something for the desirability attached to New Zealand's politics, policy, culture and “way of life”.<sup>24</sup> Malaysia's initial handling of the pandemic—at times a gendered and racialised response that perpetrated sexist attitudes and left migrant workers exposed—says something different.<sup>25</sup> Both countries' handling of COVID-19 speak to their longer-term ability to influence.

In ASEAN—a bloc of mostly smaller in economic scale and geopolitical power countries—the ability to win friends and influence others is significantly important. It matters within regional forums such as ASEAN and APEC; however, it also matters in the absence of such ecosystems. This is especially the case as the pandemic puts stress on regional governing bodies and reveals holes in influence and infrastructure. Therefore, how countries react and recover from COVID-19 is likely to remain on the horizon for decades more to come. It will influence the perceptions and opportunities of nations in the region, as well as globally.

The gendered and next generational challenges COVID-19 brings, coupled with their effect on soft power in the region, highlights the need to develop systems of recovery that are more than just robust or resilient to future shocks. South East Asia needs to strengthen its antifragility. And, thanks to the strength of those who have been traditionally marginalised and disproportionately affected by the pandemic, I believe it is in the perfect position to do so.



# Antifragility in action

The dynamism of South East Asia is one of its key strengths. By fully embracing this dynamism and developing greater antifragility, the region is able to pave a strong path to recovery and influence in the longer term. The region's future antifragility is underpinned by:

- the widespread digital uptake of youth;
- the ability to “leap-frog” ahead in technological capabilities;
- high entrepreneurialism, particularly in youth and women; and
- the strength of these often-marginalised groups in being able to do more, with less.

Firstly, South East Asia represents one of the most digitally-connected youth populations globally. This presents nations with significant opportunities to harness digital natives' skills, competitive edge and capacity to innovate.

The progress made on Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure is one of South East Asia's strongest successes, and in no small part because of the next generation's skills and adaptability.

Investing in this for the future represents a major opportunity for the region's recovery and regeneration.

Secondly, South East Asia remains nimble in terms of its technological use and therefore potential capabilities. Mobile use dominates the technological landscape, which

has made many more-clunky technological systems out-dated and irrelevant. The result is a series of highly-connected, highly agile, and sophisticated technology users (and producers) that will likely “leap-frog” ahead of many of their neighbours—particularly relevant considering remote work requirements and an increasing international digital footprint.

Thirdly, high levels of entrepreneurialism dominate the region, both across informal and formal markets. In some countries in South East Asia, women represent a majority of entrepreneurs—and over 61 million entrepreneurs across the region. Not only is entrepreneurship one of the few ways out of poverty that is possible for individuals entirely on their own, but entrepreneurship remains one of the most important tools nations have to ensure antifragility and innovation. Inherently creative, entrepreneurship takes previous challenges and gaps, and turns them into opportunities—the soul of an adaptive, antifragile approach.

Finally, collectively representing a majority of South East Asia's population, youth and women represent two core groups of individuals that hold significant power in determining what happens next. They are practiced at being able to do more, with less resources, power, and access. And while challenges might have defined many elements of their experience, it also means they have had a chance to practice navigating major systemic challenges to carve spaces of influence and impact. The result is a powerful combination, if society—and government—capitalises on it.

# Flourishing South East Asia in recovery

But there are threats to this model of antifragility and recovery. Poor governance and weak institutions, token and marginal inclusion, a lack of intersectional policies and support mechanisms, hierarchy and ageism, racism and ethnic tensions within states, and good old-fashioned sexism and inequality at the most basic levels of society—in the family and in the home—remain threats.

Yet, how governments act now matters. It matters not only to the individuals most affected in society. It matters for their communities, the SDGs, and overall economic

viability. It also matters to a nation's future soft power, which signals their future international capital and political and economic sway.

How women and youth make it through COVID-19 will be the test for measuring the region's recovery, and a marker of South East Asia's ability to progress on the SDGs despite unexpected challenges. The ability of South East Asian nations to develop antifragility will therefore be reliant not only on their policy and societal response, but also by their ability to capitalise on and fully back women and the next generation as they pioneer change.





## About the Griffith Asia Institute (GAI)

The Griffith Asia Institute (GAI) is an internationally recognised research centre in the Griffith Business School. We reflect Griffith University's longstanding commitment and future aspirations for the study of and engagement with nations of Asia and the Pacific.

At GAI, our vision is to be the informed voice leading Australia's strategic engagement in the Asia Pacific—cultivating the knowledge, capabilities and connections that will inform and enrich Australia's Asia-Pacific future.

We do this by: i) conducting and supporting excellent and relevant research on the politics, security, economies and development of the Asia-Pacific region; ii) facilitating high level dialogues and partnerships for policy impact in the region; iii) leading and informing public debate on Australia's place in the Asia Pacific; and iv) shaping the next generation of Asia-Pacific leaders through positive learning experiences in the region.



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