

Gender Equity in Education for Women in Southeast Asian Developing Countries: A Systematic Analysis and Strategies for Inclusive Development

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Abstract: Despite being a crucial region for economic growth in the contemporary world, Southeast Asia continues to experience gender inequality in education. This issue is rooted in deeply entrenched cultural norms, economic disparities, and ethnic marginalization. Despite three decades of policy interventions, structural barriers persist: Over the past 30 years, while all countries in Southeast Asia have implemented policies aimed at promoting gender equality in education, challenges such as discrimination, differential treatment, and gender stereotyping persist, hindering women's access to educational opportunities. This study conducts a systematic comparative analysis of six developing countries in Southeast Asia. Integrating and analyzing secondary data alongside relevant case studies reveals how patriarchal cultural traditions interact with urban-rural disparities, ethnic marginalization, workplace prejudice, and inadequate policy implementation to exacerbate local disadvantages in women's access to education. Consequently, this study proposes a multidimensional approach that combines educational reforms, economic incentives, and legal safeguards as policy suggestions, emphasizing locally adapted strategies to promote progress in gender equality in education through collaborative efforts among all sectors of society. This research transcends the limitations of previous studies that focused solely on single-country or single-factor analyses, providing a robust framework for understanding educational inequality within the complex social systems of Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the study advocates for collaboration among various sectors of society and underscores the importance of enhancing female education for the overall development of the Southeast Asian region.

Keywords: Gender Equity in Education, Southeast Asia, Intersectional Disadvantage, Educational Disparities

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Southeast Asia faces significant challenges in achieving gender equality in education despite its economic dynamism and cultural diversity.

Although some countries have made significant progress in education policies promoting gender equality, and in some areas, women's enrollment in tertiary education has even surpassed that of men,

educational inequality still remains pervasive in many regions. In Cambodia, for example, there is still a notable disparity between the literacy rates of females and males [1,2], and female enrollment in lower secondary education was only 57 percent of that of males [3,4].

As a crucial engine of global economic growth, Southeast Asia is one of the most dynamic and promising economic regions in the world, comprising 10 ASEAN member states and a population of over 650 million. In recent years, Southeast Asia has generally experienced deep-rooted patriarchal norms that exceed the global average. However, due to the gender gap in education, the female labor force in Southeast Asia has not yet been fully empowered, which poses an obstacle to the region's economic development. Therefore, studying gender equality, particularly in the field of education in Southeast Asia, is of immense importance to the region's economy and potentially to the global economy as well.

Among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations, the fourth and fifth goals are "Quality Education" and "Gender Equality", reflecting the importance of improving the quality of education and empowering women and girls. Therefore, studying the educational inequality of women in developing countries in Southeast Asia and proposing strategies to improve it is crucial for enhancing overall well-being and promoting sustainable development on a global scale.

1.2. Literature review

Existing research generally indicates that the persistence of patriarchal cultures and gender norms in Southeast Asia significantly contributes to gender inequality in education within the region. Traditional attitudes grant men greater access to resources and decision-making power while encouraging women to prioritize family responsibilities over pursuing education or careers. For instance, in societies with a patriarchal tradition of residence, such as Indonesia, families facing economic shocks are more likely to sacrifice their daughters' educational opportunities to protect their sons' [5].

Existing research has emphasized both the role and limitations of education in promoting women's autonomy and countering deep-rooted patriarchal norms. Samarakoon and Parinduri indicate that in Indonesia, increasing women's years of schooling does not result in a corresponding rise in their decision-making power or ownership of assets [6]. This aligns with the findings presented by Booth, which cover the broader region: although women's literacy and employment rates are relatively high in Southeast Asia compared to the MENA region, culturally embedded issues such as patriarchy and limited marital autonomy impede the transformative potential of education [7]. These findings underscore that education alone cannot break down systemic gender hierarchies without fundamental social change.

Other studies have examined gender gaps in education within STEM fields in Southeast Asia. A study conducted by the United Nations Development Program (6-UNDP) highlights that women remain significantly underrepresented in STEM fields across the region [8]. This disparity is further exacerbated as women transition from school to the workforce in these fields. Additionally, research presented by Perez-Felkner, Felkner, Nix, and Magalhães indicates that in Cambodia, female enrollment in STEM majors is higher in less urbanized provinces compared to the more urbanized capital region [9]. This challenges the assumption that modernization and economic development automatically reduce the gender gap in education. Collectively, these studies suggest that localized labor market demands and cultural perceptions of STEM roles may have complex and far-reaching impacts on women's educational attainment in developing countries throughout Southeast Asia.

Although the proliferation of technology and the Internet has positively impacted educational development in developing countries, access to educational technology remains highly uneven across various regions of Southeast Asia. This disparity has, in part, exacerbated gender inequality in

education. Farley and Song highlight that the adoption of mobile learning (m-learning) in Southeast Asia is fragmented: while Singapore's affluent urban population benefits from advanced infrastructure, economically disadvantaged countries such as Timor-Leste face challenges due to limited connectivity and Internet censorship [10]. This digital divide disproportionately affects rural and low-income women, restricting their access to STEM resources and online education. The study by the United Nations Development Programme further emphasizes that technological advancements alone will not close this gap without targeted policies [8].

1.3. Research gap

This study addresses the lack of comparative analysis on gender inequality in education across Southeast Asia, aiming to uncover shared challenges and context-specific differences.

Existing studies have mostly focused on gender inequality in education within individual countries (e.g., Indonesia, Cambodia). However, there is a notable absence of systematic comparative analyses among these nations. Southeast Asia, as an integrated and cohesive region, displays both significant differences and shared characteristics in the educational landscapes of its member countries. Conducting a comparative analysis of gender inequality in education across Southeast Asian nations will facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the economic, social, and cultural factors that influence education and gender equality in developing countries. This, in turn, will provide theoretical support for the formulation of more effective policies.

In addition, most studies have not adequately analyzed the interconnected effects of multiple disadvantages on women's education in developing countries in Southeast Asia. This region is characterized by its ethnic and religious diversity, and issues common to developing countries, such as poverty, may compound the status and division of labor for women within various ethnic and religious traditions, thereby exacerbating gender inequality in education. This indicates that, in such a culturally complex area, economic development alone does not address the root causes of educational inequality. Although some studies have touched on this theme—such as exploring the choices made by impoverished families in different cultural contexts in Southeast Asia regarding their children's education in the face of income shocks—its significance has clearly not been sufficiently emphasized.

1.4. Research framework

This paper systematically compares educational models in developing countries in Southeast Asia to identify common challenges and context-specific differences related to gender equality. By analyzing countries with diverse economic conditions, religious traditions, and policy approaches, the study reveals how social, economic, cultural, and policy interactions influence women's access to and the quality of education. Additionally, this study will examine education in Southeast Asian countries from an intersectional perspective, exploring how overlapping disadvantages—such as rural poverty, ethnic marginalization, and religious gender roles—exacerbate female educational inequality. This study comprehensively gathers content and data from relevant research conducted between 1991 and 2024 to facilitate a thorough comparison and analysis of female education across various countries, socio-cultural contexts, and regions with differing levels of economic development in Southeast Asia.

This study aims to provide actionable insights for promoting gender equality in education across Southeast Asia.

2. Case description

In Indonesia, patriarchal norms rooted in Islamic traditions coexist with relatively high female literacy rates. Extended schooling reduces fertility rates but does not dismantle gender roles, as women's

household decision-making remains limited [6]. Rural Muslim communities, particularly in pesantren schools, enforce gender-segregated education, where female students face restricted access to public roles and male-dominated curricula [11]. Meanwhile, Vietnam's socialist policies have narrowed gender gaps in primary education [12]. However, ethnic minorities, such as the Hmong, continue to face significant disparities between genders: Though the 2009 census found a high school net enrolment rate (NER) of only 9.7% for Hmong boys, only 3.4% of Hmong girls were enrolled [13]. Hmong girls in remote areas are burdened with domestic labor and early marriages, which undermine their educational attainment despite national gender parity laws. These cases highlight how macroeconomic progress often overlooks the micro-level cultural and ethnic realities.

The intersection of poverty, ethnicity, and religion further exacerbates inequalities. In Malaysia, gender equity in education varies significantly among ethnic groups [14]. While Malay girls now achieve educational outcomes comparable to those of boys, Chinese and Indian communities lag in secondary education due to socioeconomic stratification. Similarly, Indonesia's patrilocal kinship traditions amplify income shocks caused by drought, leading families to prioritize the education of sons over daughters—a trend that is absent in matrilineal groups [5]. In rural Cambodia, female enrollment in STEM fields inversely correlates with indicators of gender equity, suggesting that development agendas focused on urbanization may unintentionally marginalize women in peripheral regions [9]. These patterns highlight that poverty alone does not drive inequality; rather, its intersection with cultural norms—such as son preference, gendered labor roles, and religious authority structures—creates compounded disadvantages for gender equality in education.

Policy misalignment with local realities further complicates efforts to achieve equity. Thailand's curriculum reforms have struggled to counteract deeply ingrained sexual stereotypes in textbooks, while women continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles [15]. Similarly, Cambodia's post-conflict education rebuild fails to address systemic issues such as teacher bias and deficiencies in rural infrastructure [16]. Even in Vietnam, where socialist ideologies have promoted women's public participation, ethnic minorities like the Hmong remain excluded from the benefits of the policy, revealing a disconnect between centralized mandates and grassroots needs [17].

These findings collectively demonstrate that advancing educational equity in Southeast Asia requires moving beyond one-size-fits-all approaches. Effective strategies must align macroeconomic policies with micro-cultural contexts, invest in rural digital infrastructure to bridge urban-rural divides and prioritize intersectional interventions to address overlapping vulnerabilities [10]. Regional collaboration, exemplified by UNDP-led STEM initiatives, could harmonize disparate efforts, leveraging shared challenges to foster scalable solutions [8]. Ultimately, the path to gender equality lies not merely in expanding access but in dismantling the interconnected structural, cultural, and economic barriers that perpetuate inequality.

3. Analysis of the problem

3.1. Traditional cultural and religious factors

Traditional cultural and religious factors play a significant role in perpetuating gender inequality in education across Southeast Asia.

Although Southeast Asia is generally considered less affected by patriarchy in the field of education than other parts of Asia, deeply entrenched gender traditions persist [7]. This issue is prevalent in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, manifesting in textbook content, the gender ratio of staff, and the attitudes of teachers [15,18]. Gender inequality is particularly evident in Muslim religious schools in Indonesia [11]. Traditional Norms Even in Vietnam, a country with a socialist system, Confucian values continue to associate women with the role of caregiver, preventing them from participating in higher education and technical careers [12]. Vietnam's socialist policies have

narrowed gender gaps in primary education, but ethnic minorities remain marginalized, highlighting the need for inclusive policies. The Hmong, for example, insist on placing traditional norms about the early marriage of girls ahead of the need for education [13]. The drawbacks of patriarchy for female education are particularly pronounced in the face of economic shocks; when faced with income shocks, girls' educational opportunities may be sacrificed by their families [5]. This reflects gender inequality inherent in the distribution of educational resources in Southeast Asia as a result of traditional societal attitudes.

3.2. Economic and technological geographic differentiation

Poverty and geographic inequality disproportionately exclude rural and low-income girls from achieving educational equality. In Cambodia, while rural females have higher enrollment rates in STEM fields than their urban counterparts, this instead reveals a deeper problem: rural girls often receive vocational training out of necessity rather than out of personal choice, reflecting their limited access to quality education [9]. In Vietnam, Hmong girls in remote areas bear a heavy burden of domestic labor, and as a result, their dropout rates remain high despite the country's gender equality laws [13]. The Chinese and Indian communities in Malaysia have persistent gender gaps in secondary education due to their social class [14]. Nowadays, with the gradual spread of technology, such as the Internet, the urban-rural gap is magnified by the gap in infrastructure development. Mobile learning via the Internet, computers, or cell phones, while seemingly promising, faces many barriers, such as Internet connectivity and censorship in countries such as Timor-Leste. This digital divide between geographies exacerbates educational inequality. In addition, digital platforms often fail to address linguistic diversity and complex cultural contexts, making it difficult to reach large segments of indigenous communities [10]. The overlap of economic and technological inter-geographical disparities with the patriarchal cultural traditions of the Southeast Asian region has prolonged the difficult-to-improve educational inequalities faced by females in poorer regions of the area.

3.3. Limitations of policy implementation

Efforts to implement gender equality in policy across Southeast Asian countries often fail to yield equitable outcomes due to the challenges of fully addressing the region's complex economic and social conditions. For instance, Thailand's curriculum reform aims to eliminate stereotypes embedded in textbooks; however, it has yet to achieve significant results, and women remain underrepresented in the field of education. Despite support from the international community, post-conflict educational reconstruction in Cambodia has not succeeded in reducing gender disparities in education, primarily due to social, economic, and policy implementation challenges [16]. Furthermore, substantial investments in education throughout Southeast Asia have not effectively aligned with the needs of the labor market [19]. Particularly in STEM fields, the increase in female enrollment has not translated into corresponding labor force participation, which may lead policymakers to draw incorrect conclusions and further diminish female access to education [8].

3.4. Negative impacts

The ongoing gender gap in education significantly undermines regional development in Southeast Asia in various ways:

Economic Growth: The inequality faced by females in education may result in their underrepresentation in the workforce. This low participation of women in the labor force can further hinder productivity development in Southeast Asian countries during the modernization process, ultimately posing a significant barrier to economic growth in the region.

Social Stability: The interplay of economic underdevelopment, limited technological adoption, and entrenched cultural traditions can perpetuate poverty in certain remote areas of Southeast Asia and exacerbate the polarization between the rich and poor in Southeast Asia, particularly in rural and ethnic minority communities, where such poverty may deepen residents' marginalization and heighten the risk of social unrest.

Global Competitiveness: Southeast Asia's global competitiveness may be jeopardized by the declining participation of women in STEM fields as they transition from education to the workforce [8]. This trend undermines the region's capacity to address pressing challenges such as climate change, digital transformation, and other contemporary issues.

Health and Well-Being: For female populations, limited education is associated with higher fertility rates and poorer health outcomes [6]. This situation can jeopardize the quality of life for groups that constitute a significant portion of Southeast Asian societies, ultimately detracting from the overall health and well-being of the whole society.

3.5. Summary: a complex situation arising from intersectional disadvantages

The combined effects of race, class, and culture have created a complex and intractable situation regarding female educational equality in developing countries in Southeast Asia. In Vietnam, Hmong girls experience triple marginalization as ethnic minorities, rural residents, and females [13]. Similarly, the Indian and Chinese communities in Malaysia have made slower progress in closing the gender gap compared to the Malays, reflecting the intersection of ethnicity and socioeconomic status [14]. The STEM paradox for Cambodian women illustrates how development indicators, such as urbanization, may inadvertently disadvantage women [9]. In less economically developed areas, traditional labor demands (e.g., agriculture) create favorable conditions for women's work and health security, while urban "modernization" in turn, reinforces the gendered division of occupations.

Addressing gender inequality in education requires comprehensive policies that account for the intersection of social, economic, and cultural factors.

4. Policy framework for systemic reform

4.1. Cultural-sensitive interventions: reconciling religious norms with gender equity

Given the intricate religious and cultural traditions of the Southeast Asian region, efforts to promote gender equality in education should be approached with heightened sensitivity.

In Indonesia, for example, 87% of the population, which totals approximately 300 million, practices Islam. The gender-segregated pedagogical ecosystems and stereotype-reinforcing content in local Islamic schools often lead women to prioritize their families over their education and careers [11]. In this cultural context, the government should empower the education sector to conduct a comprehensive review of textbooks and teaching methods to minimize gender discrimination and promote women's empowerment within a religious framework. Additionally, given the long-standing tradition of patriarchy in the Southeast Asian region, laws that foster gender equality should be introduced to improve social norms and traditional practices that hinder women's education. Examples of such laws include those prohibiting child marriage, providing direct financial incentives for families to support their daughters' higher education, and enhancing gender equality in the workforce. Overall, policies aimed at improving the educational environment should be combined with initiatives to promote cultural change in order to close the gender education gap in Southeast Asia effectively.

Individuals, families, communities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should make concerted efforts to promote initiatives that support gender equality at the grassroots level, thereby creating a social environment that exemplifies women's right to equal access to education. Booth

mentioned that when parents in the community rallied to support their daughters' access to higher levels of education, girls' education completion rates increased [16]. At the same time, NGO schools have achieved notable success in providing quality education and promoting gender equality. Supporting the development of NGO schools not only enhances local education but also provides the government with successful models upon which to build.

4.2. Recommendations for closing the economic and technological gap

Building on cultural reforms, economic interventions must simultaneously address structural disparities. Suppose efforts are made to enhance gender equality in education in Southeast Asia. In that case, it is crucial to address and bridge the economic and technological disparities between rural and urban areas, as well as between developed and underdeveloped regions.

For the government, the proportion of the national education budget allocated to educational facilities—such as schools, laboratories, and teaching equipment—in rural areas should be increased. Simultaneously, to enhance female participation in STEM education, consideration should be given to providing financial subsidies to rural girls who are certified in technology.

Considering the clear correlation between access to information and the advancement of education in the Internet age, Southeast Asian governments should prioritize the expansion of 4G coverage to ensure reliable Internet access, even in remote areas. To address language and cultural barriers to digital education in these regions, governments could collaborate with technology companies to develop artificial intelligence-driven multilingual learning platforms. Furthermore, the promotion and incentivization of official languages should be supported through effective policies.

4.3. Implementation architecture: multi-stakeholder governance models

Addressing the challenges of achieving tangible results in gender equality policies within the Southeast Asian region necessitates a broader perspective and a comprehensive strategy that engages a diverse array of social systems. A crucial starting point is to establish a policy framework that harmonizes the educational, economic, and grassroots social spheres to collaborate effectively. For instance, to combat gender stereotyping in education, improvements must be made from multiple angles, including curriculum design (e.g., eliminating stereotypical content from textbooks), extracurricular initiatives (e.g., promoting female scientists or engineers), and societal norms (e.g., increasing the representation of women in technical roles). Simultaneously, the government should mitigate the potential for top-down inefficiencies in policy implementation by empowering grassroots movements (e.g., encouraging students and parents to report instances of gender inequality on campus). Additionally, assessing and addressing the gender ratio of teaching staff should be prioritized on the agenda.

Boosting the employment rate of educated women plays a significant role in enhancing female participation in education. To address the decline of women transitioning from academia to the workforce, a dedicated pathway connecting colleges and universities to the job market can be established. By implementing policies and financial incentives, the government can encourage companies to conduct pre-recruitment activities and offer additional internships for talented female students from local universities. The government could also consider providing tax breaks for companies that employ more female graduates. Additionally, public procurement could prioritize contracts with companies that maintain a balanced gender ratio among employees and ensure equal treatment for female employees.

It is essential to recognize that in certain regions where religion significantly influences social ideology, efforts to enhance gender equality in education should be harmonized with local religions and cultural practices. This approach can facilitate the development of policy models that are

adaptable to specific cultural contexts. Organizations such as ASEAN should leverage their cross-border coordination capabilities to elevate the demand for gender equality indicators as a critical objective that requires collaborative action from all countries in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, they should actively promote the advancement of gender equality in education across the region by coordinating funding, deploying volunteers, and implementing other supportive measures.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Structural determinants of educational inequality

This study demonstrates that educational inequality among women in the developing countries of Southeast Asia is structurally embedded in socio-cultural matrices and is influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including religion, economics, technology, ethnicity, and policy. In Southeast Asia, long-standing patriarchal cultures, religious norms, and customs in ethnic minority areas continue to reinforce traditional gender role divisions, creating barriers to women's access to quality education. Additionally, in some less developed regions, the economic and technological divide between rural and urban areas exacerbates the challenges faced by women's education. Furthermore, although countries in Southeast Asia have implemented gender equality policies in education, the design of these policies often lacks alignment with the cultural contexts of local societies and suffers from insufficient capacity for grassroots implementation. As a result, their actual effectiveness frequently falls short of expectations.

To address these challenges, this study proposes comprehensive policy recommendations designed to promote gender equality in education across Southeast Asia in a fundamental way through a locally adapted approach and a coordinated social effort, focusing on educational reform, economic and technical support, and legislative safeguards.

5.2. Research significance

By systematically comparing female educational inequality in developing countries across Southeast Asia, this study addresses the dual gap between cross-country analyses and cross-disadvantage studies in the existing literature. Theoretically, the study demonstrates how culture, economy, and policy exacerbate the gender divide through the multiple intersections of ethnicity, class, and geographic location. It transcends the limitations of previous research, which is often restricted to single-country or single-factor analyses, and offers a reliable framework for understanding educational inequality within the complex social systems of Southeast Asia.

At a practical level, this study is highly relevant to legislation, economic incentives, and infrastructure development for ASEAN, governments, NGOs, communities, and individuals. It underscores the necessity for policies and measures to be tailored to the actual conditions in the region. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of women's education in enhancing the region's development potential. Increasing women's educational attainment not only drives economic growth but also reduces ethnic conflicts, narrows the gap between the rich and the poor, and promotes social stability. This aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of "Quality Education" and "Gender Equality", contributing to the meaningful empowerment of women in Southeast Asia.

5.3. Methodological constraints and transformative research agenda

This study relied heavily on secondary data and literature analysis and lacked a primary survey of local education stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, and policy implementers) in Southeast Asia, which may limit the depth of explanation regarding the micro-mechanisms involved. Additionally,

the accuracy of some cross-country comparisons is constrained by varying statistical standards across countries. Future research could delve deeper into the specific pathways that drive cultural and social attitudinal change in Southeast Asia and examine the long-term effects of policy interventions through fieldwork and focus group interviews. Furthermore, future studies could concentrate on educational inequalities in politically volatile regions (e.g., Myanmar) or among minority groups in the region (e.g., indigenous Filipinos). These research gaps correspond directly to policy implementation challenges identified in Section 4.3 to enhance the comprehensiveness of the regional analysis.

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