

Gender Dynamics in ASEAN Economic Liberalization: The Implications of AFTA on Equality and Women's Empowerment

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Abstract. This study investigates the implications of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) on gender equality and women's empowerment in Southeast Asia, focusing on the effects of economic liberalization on women's access to economic opportunities and the persistence of structural inequalities. Utilizing a qualitative approach grounded in feminist economics and intersectionality, the research reveals that while AFTA has facilitated regional economic growth, it has not equitably benefited women, who continue to face systemic barriers in employment, wage equity, and access to resources. Women are often confined to precarious jobs in labor-intensive sectors, and their contributions, particularly in unpaid care work, remain undervalued. The findings highlight the intersectionality of gender with other social identities, complicating women's experiences under economic liberalization. The study underscores the need for gender-responsive policies that address the unique challenges faced by women in the labor market, emphasizing that integrating gender considerations into economic frameworks is essential for achieving equitable economic outcomes.

Keywords: AFTA, Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment, Economic Liberalization, Feminist Economics, Intersectionality.

Abstrak. Penelitian ini menyelidiki implikasi dari Kawasan Perdagangan Bebas ASEAN (AFTA) terhadap kesetaraan gender dan pemberdayaan perempuan di Asia Tenggara, dengan fokus pada dampak liberalisasi ekonomi terhadap akses perempuan pada peluang ekonomi dan ketimpangan struktural yang terus berlanjut. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif yang berlandaskan ekonomi feminis dan interseksionalitas, penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa meskipun AFTA telah memfasilitasi pertumbuhan ekonomi regional, hal ini belum memberikan manfaat yang setara bagi perempuan, yang terus menghadapi hambatan sistemik dalam pekerjaan, kesetaraan upah, dan akses terhadap sumber daya. Perempuan sering terjebak dalam pekerjaan yang tidak stabil di sektor-sektor yang padat karya, dan kontribusi mereka, terutama dalam pekerjaan perawatan yang tidak dibayar, tetap tidak dihargai dengan semestinya. Temuan-temuan ini menyoroti interseksionalitas gender dengan identitas sosial lainnya, yang memperumit pengalaman perempuan di bawah liberalisasi ekonomi. Penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya kebijakan yang responsif terhadap gender yang dapat mengatasi tantangan unik yang dihadapi perempuan di pasar tenaga kerja, dengan menegaskan bahwa mengintegrasikan pertimbangan gender ke dalam kerangka ekonomi sangat penting untuk mencapai hasil ekonomi yang adil.

Kata Kunci: AFTA, Kesetaraan Gender, Pemberdayaan Perempuan, Liberalisasi Ekonomi, Ekonomi Feminis, Interseksualitas.

1. INTRODUCTION

For several decades, regional economic integration has served as a cornerstone of ASEAN's strategy to navigate the evolving dynamics of globalization. Since the establishment of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 1992, member states have pursued the reduction of tariffs and the elimination of non-tariff barriers, with the intention of creating a seamless free trade zone. The objectives were clear: to enhance regional trade, attract foreign direct investment, and elevate Southeast Asia's position in the global economy (ASEAN Secretariat, 2015). However, beneath this narrative of growth and efficiency lies a more critical question: who truly benefits from economic liberalization—and who is systematically left behind?

AFTA was founded on the premise that free markets would naturally yield shared prosperity. Yet, this assumption frequently neglects the enduring social and structural inequalities that shape individuals' access to the benefits of trade—particularly those based on gender. Across many ASEAN countries, women continue to face systemic barriers in employment, capital access, political and economic representation, and wage equity (UN Women, 2020). In the absence of deliberate and gender-responsive policies, economic liberalization may exacerbate, rather than alleviate, these existing disparities.

Feminist economic theory offers a crucial framework for interrogating these assumptions. It challenges the notion of markets as neutral arenas, revealing instead how they often reproduce and reinforce prevailing hierarchies—particularly those rooted in gender and class. From the invisibilized value of unpaid care work to gendered divisions of labor embedded in wage systems, feminist economists argue that any analysis of trade must extend beyond aggregate indicators of growth and productivity (Elson, 1999; Benería et al., 2016). It compels us to ask: under what labor conditions is this growth produced? And who bears the invisible costs of economic transformation?

Since the implementation of AFTA, women have become central to Southeast Asia's export-led economic transformation, especially in

labor-intensive sectors such as textiles, garments, and electronics. While these industries are often held up as symbols of modernization and opportunity, the reality is more complex. Many of these jobs are precarious, underpaid, and lack social protections. They are built upon the flexibility and disposability of labor—characteristics disproportionately associated with female workers in the global South (Standing, 1999; Seguino, 2000). In this context, the rhetoric of women's "empowerment" through market participation can obscure the persistence of economic subordination.

The agricultural sector presents a similar dynamic. Market liberalization has intensified competition, often disadvantaging small-scale farmers—many of whom are women. With limited access to land ownership, credit, technology, and agricultural extension services, these women are often marginalized in the increasingly competitive rural economy (FAO, 2020). Structural power imbalances in land tenure and decision-making exacerbate these vulnerabilities, pushing many female farmers further to the periphery of regional development narratives.

Women entrepreneurs, particularly those leading micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), also encounter significant constraints. Despite their critical contribution to local economies, women-led MSMEs remain underrepresented in export markets. Barriers such as limited access to financing, digital platforms, business training, and cross-border networks continue to impede their participation in regional value chains (UNESCAP, 2020; ADB, 2022). Rather than leveling the economic playing field, liberalization often reinforces existing disparities, disproportionately benefiting actors with greater resources, mobility, and institutional support.

This is where an intersectional approach becomes essential. Gender does not operate in a vacuum—it intersects with class, ethnicity, citizenship status, and other axes of identity to shape lived experiences under economic integration. Migrant women workers from countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines, for instance, play a vital role in the economies of Malaysia and Singapore. Yet, they frequently face layered forms of exclusion, navigating both

gendered labor markets and restrictive migration regimes (Parreñas, 2015; Piper & Lee, 2016). Their economic contributions—particularly through remittances—are critical, but their rights and needs are largely unacknowledged in regional trade discourses.

To ASEAN's credit, institutional mechanisms such as the ASEAN Committee on Women (ACW) and the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Women (AMMW) have been established to promote gender equity. However, gender remains largely peripheral in core economic policymaking, particularly in trade and investment frameworks. Agreements like AFTA rarely incorporate gender impact assessments or enforce gender-responsive provisions, leading to a disconnect between economic agendas and the realities of those most affected by them (True, 2016). It is also important to situate AFTA within its historical and geopolitical context. Conceived during the early 1990s, AFTA emerged at a time when ASEAN sought to consolidate its position amidst intensifying global competition and the rise of trade blocs such as NAFTA and the European Union (Nair, 2009). The focus, understandably, was on economic consolidation and competitiveness—rather than equity, inclusion, or social justice. Consequently, distributive concerns were subordinated to market priorities.

This market-driven orientation remains problematic in light of ASEAN's deep intra- and inter-state disparities. The economic profiles of Singapore and Malaysia, for example, differ starkly from those of Myanmar or Laos. Within countries, disparities along lines of class, gender, and geography further complicate the promise of "shared" regional development. A uniform trade policy cannot meaningfully account for these variations (Dosch, 2012). Feminist economic analysis addresses this gap by foregrounding marginalized experiences and exposing the uneven distribution of gains and losses under liberalization. One critical aspect often omitted from trade policy discourse is unpaid care work—the invisible labor of childcare, eldercare, food preparation, and household management that is disproportionately borne by women. As liberalization increases economic pressures and promotes labor market flexibility, it often

exacerbates the "double burden" on women, particularly in low-income and informal sectors (Fraser, 2014). In much of ASEAN, where state-supported care infrastructure remains limited, this intensifies gendered economic insecurity.

Moreover, AFTA must be analyzed in the context of ASEAN countries' commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 8 on decent work and inclusive economic growth. In theory, trade liberalization could facilitate progress toward these goals. However, in practice, without strong safeguards and redistributive mechanisms, liberalization may entrench precarious employment, widen wage gaps, and disproportionately expose women to exploitative labor conditions—particularly in feminized sectors like domestic work, agriculture, and light manufacturing (ILO, 2019; UN Women, 2020).

Encouragingly, some ASEAN member states have introduced progressive gender-sensitive reforms. The Philippines, for instance, has enacted the Magna Carta of Women, while Indonesia and Malaysia have developed initiatives to support women-led enterprises. However, these national efforts remain fragmented and often lack alignment with regional trade frameworks such as AFTA. Without greater policy coherence and integration, such advances risk remaining isolated and insufficient to drive systemic change.

In the final analysis, the AFTA experience underscores a broader challenge: the risk of economic integration becoming an elite-driven project that excludes the voices and interests of women workers, small-scale producers, and caregivers. When trade policies are formulated without their active participation, the result is not merely inequality—it is a structural injustice that undermines the promise of inclusive development. This study thus carries both analytical and political urgency. By engaging feminist economic theory, intersectionality, and critical international political economy, it seeks to illuminate how regional liberalization under AFTA has affected women in uneven and often detrimental ways. More importantly, it calls for a reimagining of regional economic governance—one that centers care, redistributive justice, and

the dignity of all workers, rather than relying solely on metrics of competitiveness and growth.

2. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach through a literature-based research design to explore how economic liberalization under the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) framework affects gender equality and women's empowerment in Southeast Asia. Drawing on feminist economics and the lens of intersectionality, the research examines the relationship between regional economic policy and the historical and structural gender inequalities that shape the region.

Feminist economics forms the theoretical backbone of this analysis, offering a critical counterpoint to mainstream economic assumptions that often treat markets as neutral and rational. Instead, feminist economists argue that global economic systems are deeply embedded in patriarchal power structures—systems that routinely marginalize women from formal economic spaces and devalue their contributions, particularly in the form of unpaid care and reproductive labor. From this perspective, trade agreements like AFTA—which emphasize growth and efficiency—must also be interrogated for how they ignore questions of equity, justice, and gendered impacts (Elson, 1999; Benería et al., 2016).

To deepen this analysis, the study also uses the lens of intersectionality—an approach rooted in feminist theory that highlights how multiple social identities such as gender, class, ethnicity, and migration status intersect and shape people's lived experiences. Rather than treating "women" as a single, homogeneous category, this perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of how economic policies impact women differently depending on their social positioning (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000). In doing so, the research aims to surface the varied and often hidden consequences of liberalization on women across different contexts in the region.

The data for this study is drawn from a wide range of secondary sources relevant to the topic. These include key ASEAN policy documents—such as the ASEAN Framework Agreement on Enhancing ASEAN Economic

Cooperation and the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025—as well as national policies related to gender and economic development from member countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Reports from international organizations like the International Labour Organization (ILO), UN Women, and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) are also examined. To capture the diversity of perspectives and real-world dynamics, scholarly articles, academic books, and reputable media reports are included as well.

Document analysis is carried out systematically to identify policy narratives, structural frameworks, and economic practices that shape women's positions in the context of regional integration. The study employs critical discourse analysis to examine how language and narratives within ASEAN trade documents construct particular understandings of growth, labor, and economic success—often while rendering women's experiences invisible or marginal. This approach allows for a closer look at how gender inequalities are either ignored or reinforced through seemingly technical policy language.

In addition, thematic analysis is used to draw insights from the literature and reports reviewed, focusing on key issues that emerge at the intersection of free trade and gender. Some of the central themes explored include the overrepresentation of women in labor-intensive export industries, women's exclusion from trade-related benefits, unequal access to economic resources, and the vulnerability of migrant and informal women workers in regional production systems. These themes serve to illustrate the concrete ways in which AFTA operates within gendered social realities that are often overlooked in trade policy discussions.

By combining feminist economics, intersectionality, and international political economy, the research methodology aims not only to analyze the gendered impacts of AFTA, but also to uncover how seemingly technocratic economic policies can reproduce structural inequalities. In doing so, this article seeks to contribute to broader debates on ASEAN's political economy, while advocating for more

inclusive, progressive, and gender-responsive policy approaches that center the voices and needs of women and other marginalized groups.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Representation of Women in the AFTA Discourse: Between Invisibilization and Technocratization

Since its establishment in 1992, the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) was designed as a regional economic project aimed at creating a free trade zone in Southeast Asia through the elimination of tariffs and non-tariff barriers among ASEAN member states. However, in its formulation and implementation process, AFTA has been primarily articulated through technocratic and economic narratives that prioritize market growth and efficiency, without incorporating social dimensions such as gender equality and distributive justice. This perspective reveals how the dominant logic of trade liberalization within the framework of international political economy (IPE) often overlooks the experiences and positions of women in the regional economy, whether as producers, workers, consumers, or micro-entrepreneurs. Official ASEAN documents such as the AEC Blueprint 2025 and the ASEAN Economic Community Vision 2025 emphasize the importance of "market connectivity," "labor mobility," and "regional competitiveness," but provide minimal reference or analysis of their specific impact on women (ASEAN Secretariat, 2015). Women are almost always reduced to passive objects within the framework of economic development, rather than active subjects with political or economic agency. This reflects a form of gender blindness in regional policy, aligning with feminist economic critiques of the supposed neutrality in market economic policies.

From a feminist economic perspective, the assumption that markets are gender-neutral is fundamentally rejected. Feminist economists like Diane Elson (1999) have long argued that the market is a gendered institution—shaped by and shaping gender-based power relations. When policies like AFTA are formulated without considering the social structure and the unequal division of labor, the result is the reproduction of deeper inequalities. For instance, sectors

directly affected by tariff liberalization—such as garments, electronics, and agriculture—are dominated by female labor, yet their vulnerability increases due to weak social protection and limited bargaining power in the regional labor market.

Within the framework of international political economy, economic liberalization cannot be separated from the dynamics of inter-state power and the national elite interests that drive the free trade agenda. ASEAN member states are not homogeneous in terms of economic capacity and labor structures, but the AFTA framework tends to standardize policies and targets, ignoring internal disparities and their impact on vulnerable groups. This is exacerbated by ASEAN's governance characteristics, which prioritize non-intervention and consensus, perpetuating "politically safe" policies that avoid sensitive issues—such as gender equality (Robinson, 2009). Furthermore, the regional economic narrative reflects institutional masculinization—where key actors in negotiations, policy drafting, and trade project execution are male-dominated technocrats, state officials, and business elites (True, 2012). Women's representation in the regional policy arena is almost invisible, both quantitatively and substantively. This directly impacts the absence of a social justice perspective in market integration policy formulation. The ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework (2016) does note efforts to mainstream gender, but its implementation has not been integrated into key economic documents like the AEC Blueprint or the AFTA framework. According to UN Women (2021), women's participation in the ASEAN economy has significantly increased, particularly in the micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) sector, which contributes over 50% of jobs in Southeast Asia. However, women's access to regional markets, technology, and trade incentive schemes remains limited. On the other hand, trade liberalization under AFTA often has negative effects on small economic actors, including women, who struggle to compete in an increasingly open market.

Therefore, the absence of women's representation in AFTA's narrative and policies is not just a symbolic issue but a reflection of exclusive power relations and gender bias. The liberalization, which is claimed to be neutral and

beneficial for all parties, actually deepens the marginalization of certain groups. This analysis shows that within the context of AFTA, institutional structures and policy discourses have created a form of gendered exclusion, while simultaneously masking women's economic contributions behind technocratic jargon. Moreover, intersectionality needs to be understood as an analytical tool to capture the diverse experiences of women under the AFTA framework. Women in the informal sector, migrant women, rural women, and female-headed households experience different impacts from economic liberalization depending on their social, ethnic, class, and work status. When regional economic institutions fail to accommodate this complexity, liberalization becomes not just an economic project but also a process of structural exclusion that reinforces existing social hierarchies (Crenshaw, 1991; Rai & Waylen, 2014).

The lack of gender issues in AFTA's discourse cannot be separated from the ideological framework underpinning the regional economic liberalization project. From the IPE perspective, trade liberalization is often viewed as a rational strategy to stimulate growth and investment, yet this logic ignores the redistributive and social dimensions of economic policy. ASEAN countries adopting AFTA tend to emphasize labor-intensive, low-wage export sectors as sources of economic growth, where women form the backbone of the workforce—but remain invisible in decision-making processes. Furthermore, ASEAN economic institutions such as the ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM), the High-Level Task Force on Economic Integration (HLTF-EI), and the ASEAN Secretariat itself remain dominated by technocrats and senior officials who are relatively homogeneous in terms of gender and class. This reveals a patriarchal institutionalism in the regional policy structure, where strategic decisions rarely consider the participation of women or civil society organizations representing gender interests (Bakker, 2003; True & Mintrom, 2001).

The most concrete form of this exclusion can be seen in how AFTA policy ignores care economy and reproductive labor, most of which is performed by women. These activities form the invisible foundation of the productive

economy. As trade liberalization promotes wage labor, the burden of care work increases without institutional support such as social security systems or childcare services. In many cases, women are forced to accept informal or part-time jobs in order to manage the double burden, a dynamic that Elson & Cagatay (2000) describe as the missing link between macroeconomics and women's social life.

The top-down formulation of AFTA, which is closed to civil society input, results in limited accountability and transparency mechanisms. Women's organizations and feminist networks in ASEAN, such as the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), have long advocated for a more participatory and gender-responsive approach. However, in its annual report, APWLD (2020) notes that "ASEAN economic policies fail to recognize women's labor and contributions to the regional economy and actively neglect the specific gendered impacts of market liberalization."

A concrete example of gender invisibility in AFTA can be observed in small-scale agriculture and fisheries, which are still predominantly female-dominated in countries like the Philippines, Myanmar, and Indonesia. Although these sectors are part of tariff liberalization, no concrete steps have been taken to ensure protection and empowerment for female farmers or fisherwomen who face challenges such as price competition, unequal land ownership, and limited access to technology and markets. Without affirmative action, liberalization only exacerbates inequality.

Beyond the absence of gender in policy documents, the neglect of gender issues in AFTA also has long-term consequences for the domestic economic structures of ASEAN countries. According to an ILO report (2022), globalization and economic integration in Southeast Asia have led to an increase in precarious work and labor flexibilization, a trend that disproportionately affects female workers. Short-term contracts, outsourcing systems, and limited social protection have led to women's further exclusion from secure and sustainable formal work.

In Indonesia, for example, labor-intensive industries such as textiles and electronics have become the backbone of post-AFTA exports, yet

the majority of workers are women employed in contract labor with low wages (Saptari, 2000). While the government emphasizes the macroeconomic benefits of increased exports and foreign investment, there is no comprehensive policy ensuring equitable distribution of these benefits—especially for vulnerable groups such as female laborers. As investment increases and production rises, the workload for women grows, both in production and in the domestic sphere, which remains invisible.

Another important implication to note is the relationship between economic liberalization and access to public services. Within the neoliberal framework underpinning AFTA, states tend to reduce their role in economic intervention and promote privatization of services such as education, healthcare, and social protection. As a result, lower-class women, who rely on public services, are the most affected when access to basic services becomes costly and uneven. Thus, AFTA's gender-neutral narrative not only conceals structural inequalities but also reinforces unequal social relations. Both feminist economic approaches and IPE open space to understand how free trade policies are inherently political and ideological, carrying differing impacts depending on one's socio-economic and gender position.

3.2 Gender Inequality in the Access and Economic Benefits of AFTA

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations Free Trade Area (AFTA) represents a pivotal step towards economic integration within Southeast Asia by fostering policy initiatives to promote trade liberalization. However, the promises of economic development under AFTA are not equally accessible, particularly for women. This analysis synthesizes various studies to elucidate how gender inequality affects access to the economic benefits of AFTA, the pathways through which these disparities manifest, and the broader implications for economic growth in the region.

Gender Disparities in Industry and Informal Sector

Empirical evidence converges around the notion that gender inequality diminishes economic growth by limiting women's labor market participation and educational

opportunities. A study examining gender inequality in education and its impact on economic development indicates that a significant disparity in educational attainment generates a decrement in human capital which, in turn, adversely affects economic output (Alwago, 2023). This relationship is supported by data suggesting that countries with higher education gender parity witness improved economic performance, as women's contributions to the labor force are maximized. Furthermore, it was argued that gender inequality constrains the utilization of female labor potential, which is critical when assessing the overall economic outcomes within industries benefiting from AFTA (Schmillen, 2018).

One of the most critical indicators of gender inequality in AFTA member countries is the persistent wage gap between men and women. Regionally, studies indicate that women earn on average 20-30% less than men for similar work, highlighting systemic biases within labor markets (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2022). This wage disparity is not merely a reflection of direct discrimination but is also rooted in occupational segregation, where women are often confined to lower-paying sectors despite holding similar qualifications to their male colleagues. Women's lower salaries are exacerbated by a lack of representation in higher-paying job categories, further entrenching inequality (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2022). This issue is compounded when considering the broader implications of trade liberalization, as economic policies fail to account for gender-specific barriers that exacerbate wage disparities.

AFTA's economic policies often do not consider the differential impacts on men and women, resulting in unequal access to trade-related benefits. Gender disparities are especially pronounced in sectors typically characterized by higher female labor participation, such as textiles and agriculture. As these industries stand to gain significantly from AFTA's trade liberalization, it is essential to evaluate how institutional barriers may limit women's ability to access higher-paid positions or entrepreneurial opportunities in these sectors (Tokal et al., 2023). It is highlighted that initial growth in tourism may exacerbate gender inequality before eventually leading to

improvements as economies mature (Mitra et al., 2022). This concept extends to AFTA, suggesting that while the initial gains may favor traditionally male-dominated sectors, increasing trade can eventually lead to greater opportunities for women if supportive policies are enacted.

Impacts of Gender Inequality within AFTA Member States

The data on gender pay gaps and labor participation across AFTA member states reveal stark contrasts. Countries like Singapore and Thailand show higher female labor participation rates and a narrower gender pay gap, often attributed to more progressive policies aimed at empowering women (Ong & Habibullah, 2012). In contrast, nations such as Myanmar and Cambodia face significant challenges, with women's participation rates in the labor market remaining low and wage disparities notably higher.

Gender inequality's impact is particularly salient in low-income countries that are members of AFTA. For instance, gender inequality has a significant negative correlation with economic development in the region, revealing that many women remain excluded from the formal economy (Onogwu, 2021). This exclusion is often a result of socio-cultural barriers, education disparities, and lack of access to financial resources. Employing a quantitative analysis, the study sheds light on how various demographic factors contribute to the persistence of gender inequality.

A notable challenge in addressing gender inequality in access to economic benefits also involves the uneven distribution of trade benefits across different regions within AFTA countries. Without targeted strategies to ensure women's inclusion in economic processes, the gains from AFTA may disproportionately favor men, hence reinforcing existing inequalities.

According to the World Economic Forum's report on gender parity, the considerable differences in economic participation highlight the inequalities embedded within AFTA's economic framework. Women in lower-income AFTA countries often encounter legal and societal restrictions that inhibit their ability to work outside the home or enter competitive job sectors, thereby diminishing the potential

economic benefits aimed by trade agreements (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2017). Moreover, when examining sectoral participation, data show that women are heavily concentrated in sectors with higher informal employment, which is inherently unstable and presents numerous barriers to economic empowerment (Othman et al., 2022).

Bringing Gender Inequality Forward

To mitigate the adverse effects of gender inequality on economic outcomes within the framework of AFTA, several policy recommendations emerge. First, it is imperative that member states enact policies aimed at closing the gender education gap, thereby enhancing women's participation in higher-skilled economic roles (Atiq & Qadri, 2021). Addressing not only the educational aspect but also cultural norms that constrain women's economic participation is essential.

Furthermore, investment in women-centric programs that facilitate entrepreneurship and provide access to finance could enhance women's ability to tap into the economic benefits afforded by AFTA. Measurable outcomes should be established to assess progress in reducing disparities and enhancing women's economic empowerment. For example, the introduction of quotas for women in leadership positions within industries directly influenced by AFTA could alter the dynamics to ensure more equitable access to trade benefits (Casara et al., 2024).

These strategies should focus on bolstering female representation in key sectors through targeted educational programs and vocational training that align with the evolving demands of the economy. Corroborating findings from broader studies shows that increasing women's skills and access to better-paying jobs significantly contributes to overall economic growth. Moreover, enhancing women's financial literacy and access to credit facilities could promote entrepreneurship in both the formal and informal sectors, enabling women to leverage their roles as economic contributors (Alliance for Financial Inclusion (AFI), 2023). By adopting gender-responsive policies that recognize and address systemic barriers to women's participation, AFTA could foster a more equitable regional economy that realizes

the full economic potential of its female population (Ong & Habibullah, 2012).

Women's marginalization in crucial sectors such as manufacturing and the informal economy underscores the complexities of addressing disparities in economic opportunities. Bridging this gender gap is not merely a matter of equity; doing so is crucial for the sustainable economic prosperity of the region. The intricate relationship between gender inequality and economic growth in the context of AFTA emphasizes the pressing need for inclusive policies that enable women to participate fully in the economy. By addressing the barriers that restrict women's access to economic opportunities, member states can not only promote gender equality but can also unlock significant economic potential that will benefit the entire region. The intersection of gender equality and economic policies must be a strategic priority in discussions surrounding AFTA if long-term, sustainable growth is to be achieved.

3.3 Economic Liberalization, Women Migrant Workers, and Invisible Work

The ASEAN region has undergone significant economic restructuring over the past few decades, largely as a result of its commitment to economic liberalization. One of the most influential initiatives in this process has been the creation of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), which sought to reduce tariffs and facilitate greater trade and investment flows among member states. AFTA has undoubtedly stimulated intra-regional trade, enhanced investment linkages, and fostered a more integrated ASEAN economy (Okabe & Urata, 2014). However, while these developments are often lauded in macroeconomic reports for promoting efficiency and competitiveness, the impacts on labor—particularly women migrant workers—require closer scrutiny.

Economic liberalization, while beneficial to formal sectors, has triggered transformations in both formal and informal labor markets. The informal economy, in particular, has expanded in response to competitive pressures and the demand for flexible labor. Within this informal economy lies a critical but underappreciated form of labor: invisible work, which is

predominantly carried out by women. This includes unpaid domestic work, caregiving, and underpaid labor in sectors such as agriculture and domestic service. Such work exists largely outside of formal regulatory systems, making it difficult to quantify and easy to overlook in national economic assessments (Suh & Khan, 2003; Au et al., 2019). Yet, this labor is indispensable to household survival and economic resilience, particularly in an environment increasingly shaped by neoliberal policies.

The liberalization process has indirectly contributed to increased labor mobility within ASEAN, including among women who migrate across borders in search of employment. These women typically find work in sectors such as domestic labor, manufacturing, and agriculture—sectors characterized by low wages, long hours, and limited labor protections. Although intra-ASEAN migration policies have aimed to harmonize labor standards and reduce barriers to mobility, research suggests that these efforts remain limited in scope and effectiveness when it comes to non-standard employment arrangements (Fouskas et al., 2019). In many cases, the economic openings created by AFTA have coincided with an expansion in the demand for flexible and low-cost labor, inadvertently reinforcing exploitative working conditions for migrant women.

The gendered nature of these labor markets is especially striking. Women migrant workers are often channeled into roles that are socially and culturally associated with femininity—care work, cleaning, food processing, and garment production—roles that are consistently undervalued and underpaid. Despite their significant contributions to both the economies of their host and home countries, these women are frequently excluded from policy considerations, labor rights frameworks, and development plans (Liu et al., 2019). The result is a systematic devaluation of their labor, both economically and socially, which serves to perpetuate cycles of poverty and marginalization.

A critical lens through which to analyze this phenomenon is intersectionality. The experiences of women migrant workers cannot be fully understood without considering how their gender intersects with other identity markers such as migration status, social class,

race, and education level. These intersections generate multiple and overlapping forms of vulnerability. For example, migrant women may be well-educated but still find themselves relegated to low-status jobs due to legal restrictions, language barriers, or racial and gender stereotypes. Studies have shown that even when these women possess higher levels of education than their native-born peers, they continue to face wage disparities, limited career mobility, and heightened job insecurity (Ressia et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2019).

These inequalities are not simply the result of individual employer biases, but are embedded within broader structural conditions shaped by economic liberalization and migration policies. The deregulation and flexibilization of labor markets—hallmarks of neoliberal economic reforms—often prioritize investor and employer interests at the expense of worker protections. For migrant women, who are already on the margins of formal employment structures, this means a heightened risk of exploitation, abuse, and invisibility. This marginal status also undermines their ability to organize collectively or advocate for improved working conditions, thus limiting their bargaining power in a highly competitive labor market (Gilani et al., 2023).

One of the most persistent challenges in this context is the invisibility of care and domestic work. Much of this work is conducted in private households or informal settings and is thus excluded from labor market data and national accounting systems. Nonetheless, it plays a vital role in maintaining the daily functioning of households and the overall productivity of the economy. The marginalization of this work in policy and economic analysis reflects an enduring gender bias—one that fails to recognize the reproductive labor that underpins the formal economy (Au et al., 2019). As such, the benefits of economic liberalization, while apparent at the macro level, are often secured through the undervaluation and exploitation of labor performed by marginalized groups, particularly women migrant workers.

Moreover, the political invisibility of these women further complicates efforts to address their concerns. Because their work is often classified as informal or non-standard, they are frequently left out of labor unions, government

consultations, and policy-making processes. Their voices are absent from national debates on economic development, labor rights, and social protection. This exclusion not only perpetuates their marginal status but also contributes to the ineffectiveness of current policy interventions. Without the integration of intersectional and gender-sensitive approaches, reforms risk reinforcing the very inequalities they purport to resolve.

In essence, while economic liberalization under AFTA has opened new pathways for trade and investment in the ASEAN region, its impacts on labor—especially the labor of women migrants—have been deeply uneven. The promotion of free markets and competitive economies has not necessarily translated into improved livelihoods for all. In fact, for many women migrant workers, liberalization has resulted in increased job insecurity, downward wage pressures, and continued exclusion from formal protections and benefits. The emphasis on economic growth must, therefore, be balanced with an understanding of how such growth is enabled—and who bears its hidden costs.

To move forward, ASEAN states must commit to inclusive economic policies that explicitly address the needs and realities of women migrant workers. This includes formal recognition of invisible work, the extension of labor protections to informal sectors, and the development of social safety nets that are responsive to the vulnerabilities of migrant populations. Policymakers must also adopt intersectional frameworks in labor and migration policies to ensure that overlapping forms of discrimination and disadvantage are acknowledged and addressed.

3.4 Reframing ASEAN Economic Integration: An Alternative Strategy Based on Feminist Economics and Intersectionality

Economic liberalization in regional market integration projects such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) has long been framed as a neutral, rational, and technocratic policy. The primary goal, it is claimed, is to accelerate growth, expand markets, and improve efficiency among Southeast Asian countries. However, as international political economy and feminist

economics have argued, liberalization is far from neutral. Jacqui True notes that international economic and security governance is often dominated by elite, masculinized, technocratic actors, often exhibiting a pattern of neglect toward gender issues (True, 2012). This technocratic narrative conceals the political and ideological underpinnings of liberalization, reinforcing structural inequalities across nations, social classes, and genders. This is evident in ASEAN, where economic and security policies often prioritize the interests of powerful member states, while failing to address gender dimensions—thereby deepening regional socioeconomic inequality.

In response to these complexities, a feminist and intersectional economic strategy becomes crucial. These approaches challenge the core assumptions of liberalization and offer an alternative vision for a more equitable and inclusive regional economic system. Feminist economics emphasizes that reproductive labor and unpaid care work—primarily done by women—are fundamental yet invisible foundations of economic productivity (Elson, 2017). However, macroeconomic policies like AFTA overlook this by focusing primarily on market expansion and wage labor.

Liberalization increases labor and production mobility, but it also doubles the burden on women in both public and domestic spheres. An Oxfam study shows that women in Southeast Asia spend an average of 3–6 hours per day on unpaid care work, compared to 30 minutes to an hour for men (Oxfam, 2020). Meanwhile, over 60% of women in the region work in the informal sector without social protection or labor rights (ILO, 2022). AFTA lacks policies that explicitly protect or support care work. As a result, women remain marginalized—trapped in low-wage, insecure informal employment while also shouldering unpaid domestic responsibilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this burden. According to UN Women, 72% of women in the Asia region experienced an increase in domestic and caregiving workloads during the pandemic, which was not accompanied by policy support or a redistribution of work at either the household or state level (UN Women, 2021). These realities reinforce the urgency of redefining work,

productivity, and growth from a gender-just perspective. Without recognizing care labor and adopting intersectional approaches that reflect diverse women's experiences, regional integration efforts like AFTA risk perpetuating structural inequalities.

However, examples from the region demonstrate that gender-responsive economic policies are not merely aspirational. The Philippines' 2009 Magna Carta of Women mandates gender mainstreaming in all government policies. Through the Gender and Development (GAD) budgeting framework, agencies are required to allocate at least 5% of their budgets to gender-related programs. In 2022, the national GAD budget reached PHP 152 billion (approximately USD 2.7 billion), targeting, among others, women-led microenterprises involved in regional supply chains (Philippine Commission on Women, 2022).

Vietnam has also made progress through its National Strategy on Gender Equality 2021–2030, which promotes women's participation in the formal economy and agricultural sector—areas vulnerable to market liberalization. Working with UN Women, Vietnam piloted gender-responsive budgeting at the local level in provinces such as Quang Nam and Lao Cai. These programs expanded social protection for women informal workers via community health insurance and village-based entrepreneurship training (UN Women Vietnam, 2023). These initiatives target women farmers and migrant workers often excluded from national macroeconomic frameworks.

These cases show that with progressive legal frameworks, budgetary commitment, and cross-sector partnerships, states can design gender-inclusive economic policies grounded in local realities. This is a valuable reference for pushing ASEAN—particularly AFTA—to better recognize and incorporate care and reproductive labor in market integration efforts. A key alternative strategy involves institutionalizing care work as an integral part of the regional economic system. This can be achieved through community-based childcare services, universal social protection, and safeguarding informal workers. In Southeast Asia, about 61% of women work in the informal sector without access to maternity leave or

childcare services (ILO, 2022). Institutional recognition of care and reproductive labor expands the meaning of economic productivity and challenges the dominant wage-labor paradigm.

Moreover, reforming ASEAN's economic policy institutions is essential to create inclusive decision-making spaces. Currently, female representation in ASEAN's economic governance remains low. Of 129 senior ASEAN officials in 2023, only about 21% were women, most in socio-cultural, not economic, sectors (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023). Male technocrats dominate forums like the ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM) and the ASEAN Secretariat, reproducing patriarchal, gender-biased governance structures. Democratizing ASEAN institutions requires inclusive representation mechanisms, such as gender quotas in negotiation delegations, public consultations with civil society organizations, and gender equality indicators in key documents like the AEC Blueprint. These reforms go beyond token representation. They aim to embed feminist perspectives in the formulation and implementation of regional economic policy. UNESCAP highlights that countries applying gender-responsive budgeting tend to have better human development indicators, including reduced poverty among women and higher female labor participation (UNESCAP, 2021).

Feminist economics calls for redistributing resources and opportunities fairly. ASEAN member states must implement affirmative policies to empower women-led MSMEs and local economic sectors, which are the backbone of community economies. The sixty million women-owned and -operated businesses in the region face complex barriers, including, among them, lack of access to finance and technology, low levels of financial and digital literacy, discriminatory laws and gender stereotypes (ASEAN, 2022). Gender-based financing schemes, digital training, business mentoring, and equal access to regional markets should be prioritized. Without such affirmative action, liberalization risks reinforcing the dominance of large economic actors and exacerbating inequality. By incorporating feminist economics and intersectionality, it becomes clear that market liberalization is not just an economic issue—it is a socio-political project with gendered

consequences. Regional economic policy and institutional reform should prioritize not only market efficiency but also social justice and substantive gender equality in Southeast Asia.

Intersectional approaches are also crucial to ensure that economic policies are not one-size-fits-all. Women are not a homogeneous group. Their social positions differ based on class, ethnicity, geography, and employment status. In Southeast Asia, migrant women, single mothers, rural women, and Indigenous women face distinct vulnerabilities under economic liberalization and labor market globalization (UN Women, 2021). For example, most female migrant workers from the Philippines and Indonesia are employed in domestic sectors without legal protection, making them highly vulnerable to exploitation and excluded from social security systems (ILO, 2022). Policies must therefore be based on sex- and gender-disaggregated data and grounded in contextual analysis that captures the diverse experiences and social locations of women. This enables policies to be more responsive, equitable, and effective on the ground.

Finally, there must be a shift in how regional economic integration is ideologically framed. Instead of prioritizing efficiency and growth, AFTA and other ASEAN initiatives must place social justice, collective welfare, and gender equity at the heart of economic policymaking. Reimagining ASEAN economic integration through a feminist and intersectional lens not only challenges existing norms but also builds a more resilient, inclusive, and just Southeast Asia.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the implications of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) on gender equality and women's empowerment in Southeast Asia, with a focus on understanding how economic liberalization under AFTA affects women's access to economic opportunities and the structural inequalities that persist in the region. The findings reveal that while AFTA has facilitated economic integration and growth, it has not equitably benefited women, who continue to face systemic barriers in employment, wage equity, and access to resources. Women are often relegated to precarious jobs in labor-intensive sectors, and

their contributions, particularly in unpaid care work, remain undervalued.

The research highlights the intersectionality of gender with other social identities, which further complicates women's experiences under economic liberalization. The results indicate that AFTA's economic policies, which prioritize market efficiency and growth, often overlook the gendered dimensions of labor and economic participation, perpetuating existing inequalities and marginalizing women's roles in the economy. This study contributes to feminist economic theory by illustrating how economic liberalization can reinforce structural injustices rather than promote inclusive development.

The implications of this research are significant for policymakers and stakeholders in ASEAN, emphasizing the need for gender-responsive policies that recognize and address the unique challenges faced by women in the labor market. By integrating gender considerations into economic frameworks, ASEAN can work towards achieving more equitable economic outcomes and fulfilling commitments to gender equality.

However, this study acknowledges several limitations, including the reliance on secondary data sources, which may not fully capture the lived experiences of women across diverse contexts in the region. Additionally, the focus on AFTA may overlook other regional agreements and their impacts on gender dynamics.

To address these limitations, future research should explore the long-term effects of AFTA on women's economic empowerment, particularly in specific sectors such as agriculture and informal labor. Additionally, studies could investigate the effectiveness of gender-responsive policies implemented by ASEAN member states and their alignment with regional economic frameworks. Expanding the scope to include qualitative research could provide deeper insights into the experiences of women affected by economic liberalization.

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