Will women workers fully benefit from increasing job opportunities and mobility in Southeast Asia?

The AEC will create almost 14 million new jobs as it eases cross-border movement of skilled workers.

However:

Skilled workers comprise less than 1% of the total workforce.

Income disparities, monetary gains, social networks, and easier transportation and communication encourage migration industry.

ASEAN hosts 9.9 million international migrants; 6.9 million of them are from within the region.

The net-sending countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Philippines, Viet Nam.

The net-receiving countries: Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand.

The top 5 intra-ASEAN migration corridors:
Women migrants comprise a significant share of the workforce in ASEAN destination countries. Registered female migrant workers accounted for 2-4% of all workers in Thailand and in Malaysia. Official data underestimate the numbers of female migrant workers because many of them are undocumented.

Women migrant workers are concentrated in particular employment sectors. They often do dirty, dangerous, difficult, and poorly paid jobs that locals reject. Concentration in jobs such as domestic labour, assembly lines, wholesale/retail trade, and tourism. Myanmar women are often in manufacturing, Cambodian women in agriculture and construction, and Lao women in household work.

Most women migrant workers are young and little-educated. Most have had only primary or intermediate schooling: 87% of those in Brunei Darussalam and 91% of those in Malaysia.
Women migrant workers in ASEAN earn much less than male migrants and local female workers.

Earning 30-50% less than male migrants due to low-paid jobs.

In Malaysia:
- 50% earning less than male migrants.

In Brunei Darussalam:
- 30% earning less than male migrants.

Women migrant workers contribute to the economies of their home and their destination countries.

Their contribution to ASEAN’s labour markets, economic production and cross-border remittance flows.

Driving up domestic wages in destination countries by an average of 14%.

Having the biggest impact on domestic wages in Singapore, followed by Malaysia and Thailand.

Women migrant workers are at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy.

They are concentrated in low- and medium-skilled manual jobs with little chance for skills development or job mobility.

25% of documented construction workers in Thailand are female migrants mostly from Cambodia and Myanmar.
Women migrant workers have limited social protections

- Limited protections in housing, labour contracts, income security, and healthcare
- More likely than men to miss opportunities for paid work due to the need to care for others in own household
- Free/subsidized childcare facilities, employment guarantees, and flexible working hours for household care work are needed at workplace

Women migrant workers have limited opportunities for skills development

- Skills development leads to higher wages and job mobility, especially in electronics and manufacturing sectors where women have good chances for employment
- The AEC integration plan gives priority to high-skilled workers
- To benefit from AEC integration, female migrants need skills development, easier migration processes, and social protections

Many female migrants work in the informal sectors

- This exposes them to high job insecurity, low pay and unsafe working conditions
- Undocumented female workers face significant risks including precarious work, lower pay, and sexual harassment
Women migrant workers have limited access to legal aid and collective bargaining mechanisms.

Facing barriers to getting legal aid, including lack of access to telephones and public spaces.

Forbidden to form unions and to take initiatives to improve their conditions.

Destination countries are reluctant to guarantee human rights and labour standards for migrant workers.