

# REGULATORY POLICIES, LAWS, PROGRAMS, AND PLANS SUPPORTING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN ASEAN COUNTRIES

Tran Thi Quyen \*

\* Hanoi Law University, Hanoi, Vietnam

Contact details: Hanoi Law University, 87 Nguyen Chi Thanh, Dong Da, Hanoi, Vietnam



## Abstract

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In recent decades, Southeast Asia has maintained a strong economic growth trajectory and led to financial benefits for women and improved their participation in the labor market. The future for women in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) looks promising in terms of employment and entrepreneurship (Han, 2022). In Vietnam, around 21 percent of incorporated enterprises are women-owned (World Bank, 2017). The study aimed to compare Vietnam's structured approaches to gender equality with those of other ASEAN nations. Utilizing document analysis of relevant legal texts and policy documents in Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore, the study identified significant disparities in legal provisions and their implementation. Findings indicated that while Vietnam establishes comprehensive support mechanisms, challenges in enforcement hinder real assistance for women entrepreneurs, which exhibit both similarities and differences compared to other ASEAN countries, highlighting varied levels of prioritization and legal provisions. Enhanced regional policy alignment and effective implementation are critical for fostering a favorable environment for female entrepreneurship. The findings contributed valuable insights into the role of legal frameworks in promoting gender equality, providing recommendations for policy improvement and regional collaboration that can drive economic growth and empower women across Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** ASEAN Countries, Gender Equality, Women Entrepreneurs

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Achieving gender equality is essential for creating a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world. Women's entrepreneurship is vital for promoting global economic empowerment and is closely linked to gender equality (Han, 2022). The increasing women's involvement in sectors previously

dominated by men has expanded their influence, with women entrepreneurs emerging as job creators (UN Women, 2024). The role of women in economic development has been extensively studied, particularly in the context of Southeast Asia, where women's participation in entrepreneurship is recognized as a crucial driver of growth. Various scholars have noted that women entrepreneurs

contribute significantly to employment generation and innovation, enhancing not only their own economic status but also the overall economic health of their countries (World Bank, 2024).

In Southeast Asia, countries have begun to adopt policies aimed at promoting gender equality; however, the effectiveness and specificity of these policies vary widely. In the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), six countries, including Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore, acknowledge the pivotal role of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in driving economic growth and fostering job opportunities, leading to a collective focus on bolstering this sector. Vietnam ranks among the countries exhibiting the fewest legal disparities between genders, as evidenced by the World Bank's Women, Business, and the Law database<sup>1</sup>. This database evaluates various legal barriers that women face in economic participation and provides insights into how laws and regulations can differ by gender across countries. Key areas of progress in Vietnam include property rights, where women have equal rights to own and manage property, a crucial factor for financial independence and security. In terms of employment, Vietnamese laws prohibit gender discrimination in hiring and employment practices, promoting equal opportunities in the workplace. Furthermore, the country offers maternity leave policies that support working mothers, enhancing job retention and family well-being. There are also minimal legal restrictions on women starting and running businesses, which fosters female entrepreneurship. Additionally, Vietnam has made concerted efforts to increase female representation in politics and decision-making processes, further advancing gender equality in the nation (World Bank, 2024). SMEs play a crucial role in the economic development of Vietnam, constituting over 98% of all registered businesses and contributing approximately 40% to the country's gross domestic product (GDP), as well as providing around 50% of total employment. In 2016, the SME sector experienced a growth of approximately 100,000 enterprises, a trend that was partially stimulated by enhanced governmental initiatives aimed at fostering new business formation. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that women in Vietnam own 95,906 enterprises, which represents about 21% of all formal businesses operating in the country (World Bank, 2017).

In recent years, the role of women in driving economic growth and social advancement in Southeast Asia has received increasing attention. As member states of the ASEAN seek to enhance their economic development strategies, the empowerment of women entrepreneurs has become a critical focus area. Despite the progress in gender equality policies across the ASEAN region, there remains a significant gap in comparative analyses examining how these legal frameworks are structured and their effectiveness in promoting women's entrepreneurship. Existing literature has often concentrated on individual countries or broader regional trends, overlooking the nuances of how specific legal provisions can impact women's access to economic opportunities. This study focuses on Vietnam's gender-focused legal framework, hypothesizing that it offers more structured support for women compared to those in other ASEAN countries, including Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore.

The comparative analysis is necessary to illuminate Vietnam's approach in relation to its ASEAN counterparts, revealing insights into best practices and persistent challenges faced by women entrepreneurs.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Regulatory policies, programs, and plans supporting women entrepreneurs in Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore vary in scope and focus. These initiatives aim to address the unique challenges faced by women in entrepreneurship, such as access to finance, business skills, and socio-cultural barriers.

### • Five key policies in Vietnam:

1) Vietnam's government stipulates the principles of gender equality in various areas of social and family life, measures to ensure gender equality, and the responsibilities of agencies, organizations, families, and individuals in implementing gender equality (Law No. 73/2006/QH11, 2006);

2) Vietnam sets out seven goals with specific targets and a list of activities to address the existing challenges of gender equality to reduce gender inequality and promote the role of women (National Strategy on Gender Equality for the 2011-2020 Period, 2012);

3) Female and male labor have the same rights and responsibilities as well as opportunities (Labor Code No. 45/2019/QH14, 2019);

4) Vietnam has legal support activities for SMEs (Decree No. 55/2019/ND-CP, 2019);

5) Tax is reduced for enterprises employing female workers (Law No. 14/2008/QH12, 2008).

The focus program has been on providing business training programs and microcredit services to women entrepreneurs, particularly in rural areas. These initiatives are often implemented in collaboration with local organizations such as the Vietnam Women's Union and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The training programs have been shown to improve business performance and motivation among participants (Raven & Le, 2015). Additionally, the government has emphasized the importance of socio-cultural support systems, which play a crucial role in helping women entrepreneurs navigate the challenges of the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) era (Welly et al., 2023).

### • Five key policies in Thailand:

1) Thailand's government promotes equal rights for men and women in various sectors, including business (Gender Equality Act B. E. 2558);

2) Thailand has strategies and initiatives for integrating gender perspectives into national budgeting processes to promote gender equality and women's empowerment (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020);

3) There is equal treatment of male and female workers (Labor Protection Act B. E. 2541, 2015);

4) Thailand has various forms of support for SMEs, including financial assistance and training (Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion Act (No. 2) B. E. 2561, 2018);

5) There is no difference in tax for enterprises owned by males or females (The Revenue Department, n.d.).

Thailand has implemented policies that address both personal and organizational factors affecting women entrepreneurs. Studies have shown that Thai women entrepreneurs face challenges

<sup>1</sup> <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl-data>

related to management, marketing, and financial competencies, but they are highly motivated and capable of balancing work and family responsibilities (Tantasuntisakul, 2015). The government has introduced targeted support programs, including training workshops and access to financial aid, which have been particularly effective in Southern Thailand. These initiatives have contributed to the success of women-owned businesses in the region (Cheng et al., 2015).

- Five key policies in Indonesia:

- 1) The Indonesian government promotes gender equality and prohibits discrimination against women in various sectors, including economic activities (Kolaborasi Masyarakat dan Pelayanan untuk Kesejahteraan [KOMPAK], 2018);

- 2) The national strategy focuses on improving women's access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities (KOMPAK, 2018);

- 3) There are equal rights for male and female workers and discrimination is prohibited (Law No. 13/2003, 2003);

- 4) Indonesia establishes a framework for supporting SMEs, including access to financing and market opportunities (OECD, 2018);

- 5) There is no tax reduction for women entrepreneurs ("Corporate income tax", n.d.).

Indonesia has focused on business environment reforms, such as the *Pelayanan Terpadu Satu Pintu* or One-Stop-Shop Business Licensing reform, to improve access to opportunities for women entrepreneurs. While the reform has not led to transformational change, it has advanced women's participation in business outside of Jakarta (Saha et al., 2023). Additionally, the government has recognized the importance of addressing gender disparities in access to finance, with a focus on microfinance and non-financial services to support women entrepreneurs (OECD, 2023).

- Five key policies in the Philippines:

- 1) The Philippine government ensures equal rights for men and women in employment and business activities (Republic Act No. 9710, 2009);

- 2) The government has plans to empower women and promote gender equality across all sectors (Philippine Commission on Women, 2022);

- 3) Labor Code promotes equal rights for men and women in the workplace (Labor Code of the Philippines, 1974);

- 4) The government provides financial assistance and capacity building for SMEs (Bureau of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise Development [BMSMED], 2009);

- 5) No articles specifically support women entrepreneurs (Labor Code of the Philippines, 1974).

The Philippines has implemented policies to promote gender equality and women's economic empowerment. While specific policies targeting women entrepreneurs are not explicitly detailed in the provided contexts, the country has likely adopted measures similar to those in other Southeast Asian nations, such as financial literacy programs and socio-cultural support systems. These initiatives are critical for addressing the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in the region (Chikh-Amnache & Mekhzoumi, 2023).

- Five key policies in Malaysia:

- 1) National Policy on Women aims to enhance the status of women in various sectors, including economic participation and decision-making (Faruqi, 2020);

- 2) Gender plan focuses on promoting women's participation in the workforce and ensuring equal opportunities (Hui, 2020);

- 3) Employment law contains provisions promoting equal treatment of male and female employees (Employment Act 1955, 2023);

- 4) Small and Medium Enterprises Corporation Malaysia Act 1995 (2021, latest updated version) provides various types of support for SMEs, including grants and advisory services;

- 5) Corporate Income Tax mentions corporate tax laws and regulations (PricewaterhouseCoopers [PwC], 2024).

It does not contain specific details related to support for women entrepreneurs or gender equality initiatives (Acclime, n.d.). Malaysia has a comprehensive range of policies and programs to support women entrepreneurs. These include financial aid, entrepreneurial training, and access to business networks. The government has also emphasized the importance of addressing gender stereotypes and providing targeted support for women-led businesses (Basit et al., 2020; Cheng et al., 2015; Arumugam et al., 2016). Additionally, Malaysia has recognized the need for digitalization and innovation to enhance women's access to financial resources and entrepreneurial ecosystems (Irwin et al., 2025).

- Five key policies in Singapore:

- 1) The Singapore government assures equal rights for women in marriage, employment, and business, but lacks a specific framework for integrating gender issues into legal documents (Parliament of Singapore [PARL], 1996);

- 2) Women's economic participation and leadership roles are promoted in the national plan (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2024);

- 3) The income tax focuses on corporate tax regulations and guidelines. It does not mention any information related to supporting women entrepreneurs or gender aspects (Ministry of Finance, n.d.);

- 4) The Labor Code assures gender equality with equal treatment of male and female employees (Attorney-General's Chambers of Singapore, 2020);

- 5) SMEs receive support systems and offer a range of support mechanisms, including grants and advisory services (Liang, 2007).

Singapore has a well-developed ecosystem for women entrepreneurs, with a focus on education, skills development, and access to funding. While specific policies are not detailed in the provided contexts, Singapore's robust economic infrastructure and supportive environment for entrepreneurship suggest a strong commitment to gender equality in business (Chikh-Amnache & Mekhzoumi, 2023).

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our study employed a desk review method to systematically gather essential data pertaining to laws, regulations, government policies, programs, and plans concerning women entrepreneurs in Vietnam. The desk study in comparative laws between countries involves a systematic analysis of legal frameworks, statutes, and regulations across different jurisdictions. We aim to identify similarities and differences in legal principles, practices, and outcomes related to gender equality and women entrepreneurs. By examining various legal systems, our study provides insights into how different countries address similar issues, highlights best practices, and may inform policymakers or legal practitioners in enhancing their own legal

frameworks. This type of study often utilizes secondary sources, such as academic articles, legal codes, and reports, to support its findings.

The comprehensive approach comprised several key steps.

First, a rigorous literature review was conducted to acquire an in-depth understanding of the prevailing knowledge, extant policies, and prevailing programs relevant to women entrepreneurs. Subsequently, data collection was executed by sourcing information from diverse outlets, including official government documents, reports disseminated by international organizations, academic publications, and pertinent news sources focusing on the support provided to women entrepreneurs.

Central to this analysis was the application of the “legal framework and policy environment” criteria, which involved scrutinizing the legal and policy frameworks existing to facilitate support for women entrepreneurs. This encompassed an assessment of specific laws, regulations, and

government policies tailored to the advancement of women’s entrepreneurship, following three simple steps:

- Step 1: Choose relevant policies on gender equality, corporate income tax, and the Labor Code.
- Step 2: Gather data by collecting policy documents.
- Step 3: Analysis with a gender-based approach by identifying the disparities and structural barriers, including issues such as tax and wage gaps, underrepresentation in decision-making, or lack of access to resources.

## 4. RESEARCH RESULTS

### 4.1. Vietnam policy assessment by gender-based approach

We performed a deep analysis of the five key policies in Vietnam, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Analyzing five key policy documents related to supporting women entrepreneurs in Vietnam (Part 1)

Documents	Findings	Explanation
Gender Equality Law	Clause 1, Article 12: Men and women are equal in establishing enterprises, conducting production and business activities, managing enterprises, and having equal access to information, capital sources, markets, and labor resources.	1) <i>Equality in enterprise establishment and management</i> : “Clause 1” explicitly emphasizes the equality of men and women in establishing enterprises and managing business activities. Promoting equal access to entrepreneurial opportunities helps create an inclusive economy where women can contribute to and benefit from economic growth, thereby enhancing overall economic development. 2) <i>Access to resources</i> : Ensuring equal access to information, capital sources, markets, and labor resources is crucial in leveling the playing field for women entrepreneurs. Women often face significant challenges in accessing finance and business networks, so this provision aims to dismantle these barriers.
	Clause 7, Article 5: Integrating gender equality issues in the development of legal normative documents is a measure to achieve gender equality goals by identifying gender issues, forecasting the gender impacts of the documents, and allocating responsibilities and resources to address gender issues in the social relations regulated by the legal normative documents.	1) <i>Integration of gender equality in legal norms</i> : “Clause 7” highlights the importance of integrating gender equality issues into the development of legal normative documents. By explicitly stating that gender considerations should be factored into the legislative process, it reflects a proactive approach to embedding gender equality into the fabric of governance and policymaking. This integration is essential for identifying and addressing norms that may perpetuate gender discrimination, ensuring that new laws and regulations facilitate rather than hinder gender equality. 2) <i>Identifying and forecasting gender impacts</i> : The focus on identifying gender issues and forecasting the potential impacts of legal documents is a critical step toward understanding how proposed laws may affect different genders differently. This foresight can prevent unintended negative consequences and promote equitable outcomes. 3) <i>Allocating responsibilities and resources</i> : Emphasizing the allocation of responsibilities and resources to address gender issues underscores the need for accountability in achieving gender equality goals. It signals that gender equality is not merely a theoretical aspiration but requires actionable commitments from the government and institutions.
National Strategy on Gender Equality	This strategy sets out seven goals with specific targets and a list of activities to address the existing challenges of gender equality. To support the achievement of these goals, the National Program on Gender Equality 2011–2015 was introduced under Decision No. 1241/QĐ-TTg, with five projects implemented nationwide. For the period 2016–2020, Decision No. 1696/QĐ-TTg was recently signed at the end of 2015 to approve the National Action Plan on Gender Equality 2016–2020, aimed at reducing gender inequality and promoting the role of women.	The results of implementing national goals on gender equality in various fields have shown significant progress. According to the 2019 Human Development Report, Vietnam’s Human Development Index (HDI) is nearing the upper range of the group of countries with medium HDI, ranking 118th out of a total of 189 countries. With a gender development index of 1.003, Vietnam is among the leading group within the five categories comprising 166 countries worldwide, ranking 68th out of 162 countries in terms of the gender development index. Notably, Vietnam is among the top one-third of countries in the world in terms of the proportion of female members of the National Assembly.
Labor Code	Clause 7, Article 4: The State’s policy on labor: Ensuring gender equality; regulating labor regimes and social policies to protect female workers, workers with disabilities, elderly workers, and minors.	<i>Recognition of gender equality in labor policies</i> : The explicit mention of gender equality as a core principle of the state’s labor policy underscores the acknowledgment that women and men do not experience the labor market in the same way.

**Table 1.** Analyzing five key policy documents related to supporting women entrepreneurs in Vietnam (Part 2)

<i>Documents</i>	<i>Findings</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
Labor Code	Chapter X: Specific regulations for female workers and ensuring gender equality.	Chapter X's emphasis on specific regulations for female workers further demonstrates the recognition of the unique challenges that women face in the workplace. Tailoring regulations to address these challenges — such as maternity leave, workplace safety, and anti-discrimination measures — can significantly contribute to closing the gender gap in employment and ensuring that women can thrive in the labor market.
	Increasing the retirement age for workers, including female workers.	Increasing the retirement age for all workers, including female workers, raises important discussions about gender equality. While raising the retirement age can be seen as a step toward equal treatment, it's vital to consider the broader context. Women often have different career trajectories due to child-rearing responsibilities, part-time employment, or interruptions in their careers. Therefore, policymakers need to assess whether this change could disproportionately affect women and ensure that measures are in place to support their unique circumstances, such as phased retirement options or continued access to benefits.
Decree on Legal Assistance for SMEs	Clause 4a, Article 4: Based on resources, support programs, and legal support organizations for SMEs, the decision on support is prioritized as follows: SMEs owned by women and enterprises employing a larger number of female workers that submit applications meeting the support conditions will be given priority for support.	1) <i>Prioritization of women-owned enterprises</i> : By explicitly prioritizing SMEs owned by women, the clause recognizes the unique challenges that women entrepreneurs face in accessing resources, capital, and business networks. This acknowledgment is crucial for addressing historical disparities and empowering women to take on leadership roles in the business sector. 2) <i>Support for enterprises with a female workforce</i> : The inclusion of enterprises that employ a larger number of female workers as a criterion for priority support underscores the importance of promoting not just women-owned businesses, but also gender equality within organizations. This is significant for advancing women's employment and promoting economic stability for families and communities. 3) <i>Resource allocation and accessibility</i> : The clause highlights the importance of resource-based support programs, indicating a commitment to providing financial and legal assistance tailored to the unique needs of women entrepreneurs. Such support could include grants, loans with favorable terms, and access to training programs, which can be crucial in leveling the playing field.
Corporate Income Tax Law	Clause 1, Article 15: Other cases of tax reduction: Enterprises in production, construction, and transportation that employ a large number of female workers are entitled to a corporate income tax reduction equivalent to the additional expenses incurred for female workers.	1) <i>Incentivizing gender diversity in the workforce</i> : By offering a corporate income tax reduction linked to the employment of a significant number of female workers, this provision encourages enterprises to actively recruit and retain women. This strategy not only promotes gender diversity but also recognizes the economic contributions of women in traditionally male-dominated sectors. 2) <i>Compensation for additional expenses</i> : The clause allows enterprises to offset additional expenses incurred for female workers, which may include costs related to maternity leave, childcare, training, and workplace accommodations. By providing tax relief aligned with these expenses, the government acknowledges and seeks to mitigate the financial burden on companies that prioritize gender equality in their workforce. 3) <i>Targeted support for key sectors</i> : Focusing on specific sectors like production, construction, and transportation is significant because these industries have historically been male-dominated. By specifically encouraging the employment of women in these areas, the policy can help break down occupational segregation, leading to more balanced gender representation across all sectors of the economy.

#### 4.2. Similarities and differences in policies, laws, programs, and plans supporting women entrepreneurs

The similarities and differences were identified, detailed in Table 2 for concise reference.

1. Vietnam's Law No. 73/2006/QH11 stands out for its explicit provisions on gender equality in entrepreneurship and the integration of gender considerations in legal frameworks. Other ASEAN countries have made strides in promoting gender equality, but the approaches vary in terms of specificity and implementation. Thailand and the Philippines have similar mandates for gender mainstreaming, while Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore focus more on promoting women's rights without the structured integration seen in Vietnam.

2. Vietnam's National Strategy on Gender Equality 2011–2020 is distinguished by its comprehensive framework, clear goals, and structured implementation plans. Thailand and the Philippines have similarly detailed strategies, while Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore have made progress in promoting gender

equality but often lack the same level of specificity and structured action plans. Overall, Vietnam's approach reflects a strong commitment to addressing gender inequality through targeted national strategies and programs.

3. Vietnam's Labor Code No. 45/2019/QH14 is notable for its explicit focus on gender equality and specific protections for female workers, including dedicated chapters on these issues. While other ASEAN countries also have laws promoting gender equality and protecting female workers, Vietnam's approach includes a more structured framework for ensuring these protections and addressing the unique needs of female workers. Additionally, Vietnam's proactive stance on increasing the retirement age for all workers, including women, reflects a commitment to gender equality in labor policies. Other countries, while providing essential protections, often do not have the same level of specificity regarding gender-focused regulations within their labor codes.

4. Vietnam's Decree No. 55/2019/ND-CP distinctly emphasizes prioritizing support for

women-owned and women-employing SMEs, showcasing a clear commitment to gender equality within its economic framework. In contrast, while other ASEAN countries have supportive measures for SMEs and initiatives for women entrepreneurs, they generally do not have the same level of explicit prioritization for women-owned enterprises in their legal provisions. This positions Vietnam as a leader in integrating gender considerations into SME support policies compared to its regional counterparts.

5. In general, while some ASEAN countries, like Vietnam and Thailand, offer specific incentives or support for employing women, many others focus on broader initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and women's empowerment without direct tax reductions. The approaches vary widely, reflecting each country's economic context, cultural values, and policy priorities regarding gender equality in the workforce.

**Table 2.** The comparison of policies supporting women entrepreneurs among six ASEAN countries

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Vietnam</i>	<i>Thailand</i>	<i>Indonesia</i>	<i>Philippines</i>	<i>Malaysia</i>	<i>Singapore</i>
<b><i>Gender law</i></b>						
Similarity	Gender equality in business rights	Same	Same	Same	Gender equality in the workforce and opportunities	Gender equality in business right
Difference	Integration in legal frameworks	N/A	Weaker gender impact integration in legal frameworks	N/A	Lack of comprehensive gender impact law	Lack of gender impact integration in legal frameworks
<b><i>Gender implementation plan</i></b>						
Similarity	Implementation of gender equality plans	Same	Strategic program planning	Same	Strategic program planning	Boosting women entrepreneurs and leadership
Difference	Integration in national programs with detailed plans & timelines	N/A	Lack of a comprehensive framework	N/A	Lack of detailed action plans and timelines	Lack of detailed action plans and timelines
<b><i>Labor law</i></b>						
Similarity	Legal protection for female workers, and gender equality	Same	Same	Same	Same	Same
Difference	Retirement at 56 years old (female) or 62 years old (male)	Retirement at 60 years old (male and female)	Retirement at 56 years old (male and female)	Retirement at 60 years old (male and female)	Retirement at 60 years old (male and female)	Retirement at 63 years old (male and female)
<b><i>SME law</i></b>						
Similarity	Legal support for SMEs	Same	Same	Same	Same	Same
Difference	Priority support for women-owned SMEs	No priority support for women-owned SMEs	No priority support for women-owned SMEs	No priority support for women-owned SMEs	No priority support for women-owned SMEs	No priority support for women-owned SMEs
<b><i>Corporate income tax</i></b>						
Similarity	All companies must pay tax as regulations	Same	Same	Same	Same	Same
Difference	Incentive for female-worker enterprises	N/A	No incentive for female-worker enterprises	No incentive for female-worker enterprises	No incentive for female-worker enterprises	No incentive for female-worker enterprises

#### 4.3. Comparative analysis of support mechanisms

The programs and plans supporting women entrepreneurs in Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore reflect

a commitment to addressing the unique challenges faced by women in entrepreneurship. These initiatives focus on improving access to finance, enhancing business skills, and providing socio-cultural support.

**Table 3.** The comparison of programs supporting women entrepreneurs among six ASEAN countries

<i>Country</i>	<i>Key programs</i>	<i>Focus areas</i>
Vietnam	Business training programs, microcredit services	Improving business performance, motivation, and socio-cultural support
Thailand	Training workshops, financial aid, socio-cultural support	Addressing management, marketing, and financial competencies
Indonesia	Business licensing reform, microfinance initiatives	Reducing regulatory barriers and improving access to finance
Philippines	Gender equality policies, financial literacy programs	Promoting gender equality and economic empowerment
Malaysia	Financial aid, entrepreneurial training, digitalization initiatives	Addressing gender stereotypes and improving access to financial resources
Singapore	Education, skills development, access to funding	Supporting women entrepreneurs through a robust economic infrastructure

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1. Progress in gender equality legislation and women's economic empowerment in Vietnam

Vietnam, in particular, has been commended for its proactive legislative measures to promote gender equality. The Gender Equality Law (Law No. 73/2006/QH11, 2006) is a landmark piece of legislation that outlines specific rights and responsibilities for women and men, aiming to eliminate discrimination and enhance women's participation in various sectors, including entrepreneurship (UN Women, 2024). Research demonstrates that Vietnam has made significant strides in reducing legal barriers that hinder women's economic participation, leading to a notable increase in the number of women-owned businesses (Hoang, 2024).

### 5.2. Evaluating gender equality laws in ASEAN for women's entrepreneurship

A recent study conducted by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) indicates that Vietnam has made notable progress in advancing gender equality and empowering women economically, particularly when compared to many of its Southeast Asian peers. Vietnamese women participate actively in the labor force and benefit from legal equality with men, and female-owned businesses tend to match those owned by men in terms of size, revenue, and profitability. In the report published jointly by the ADB and Vietnam's Department of Business Development within the Ministry of Planning and Investment in early 2024, the ADB praised Vietnam's extensive legal framework aimed at enhancing women's economic participation. The ADB specifically emphasizes the significance of the Gender Equality Law (Law No. 73/2006/QH11, 2006), which represents the first legislation dedicated to gender equality within Vietnam's legal system. This law seeks to promote gender equality across various domains of social and family life, including politics, economics, labor, education, science and technology, culture, information, and sports. Enforced since 2007, the Gender Equality Law requires government agencies to implement gender equality initiatives and address any violations. Additionally, it includes numerous provisions designed to protect women that are less commonly found in other countries within the region or around the world. For instance, unlike in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, Vietnam legislates equal pay for equal work. Furthermore, the country offers maternity leave benefits that surpass the International Labor Organization's minimum recommendation of 14 weeks, positioning it among those with the most generous maternity leave policies in the region (Hoang, 2024).

Comparatively, other ASEAN countries have also implemented gender-focused laws and policies, but without the same level of specificity or enforcement. For instance, Thailand's Gender Equality Act B. E. 2558 and the Philippines' Republic Act No. 9710 aim to create an enabling environment for women. Nevertheless, implementation challenges remain, and cultural norms often impede progress (Chikh-Amnache & Mekhzoumi, 2023). These findings underscore the necessity for comprehensive frameworks that not only exist on paper but are effectively enforced and integrated into the socio-economic fabric of each nation.

Despite these advances, much of the existing literature focuses on single-country studies or broad regional overviews, lacking in-depth comparative analyses across ASEAN nations. This gap is significant, as understanding the differences and similarities in legal provisions can provide critical insights into how gender equality is addressed regionally. Comparative studies could reveal best practices and inform policy improvements that may benefit women entrepreneurs across the region.

### 5.3. The need for regional policy alignment

Furthermore, while Vietnam exhibits leadership in gender-oriented business policies, the need for regional policy alignment remains evident. Variances in legal frameworks and implementation strategies among ASEAN countries can lead to inconsistencies in the support available to women entrepreneurs, especially in cross-border business endeavors. A harmonized approach to gender equality policies could facilitate better cooperation among member states and enhance the overall effectiveness of initiatives aimed at empowering women.

The analysis highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of Vietnam's gender-focused legal frameworks in supporting female entrepreneurs. While infrastructural support through laws and policies is commendable, the real challenge lies in ensuring these frameworks translate into meaningful assistance for women in business. Future research should prioritize empirical investigations into the implementation and effects of these policies across different ASEAN nations to provide robust recommendations for enhancing gender equality and women's entrepreneurship throughout the region.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the significant differences in gender-focused legal frameworks supporting women entrepreneurs across Vietnam and selected ASEAN countries. It affirms Vietnam's proactive stance in establishing comprehensive policies that promote gender equality and empower female entrepreneurs. The analysis reveals that while Vietnam's legal framework is robust and structured, the effective realization of these policies in practice is contingent upon adequate enforcement and implementation.

The findings underscore the necessity for a multi-faceted approach to gender equality in entrepreneurship that goes beyond merely establishing supportive laws. The effective implementation of these policies is essential for transforming well-intended legal provisions into tangible benefits for women. Cultural norms and local implementation challenges remain critical barriers that must be addressed to truly empower women entrepreneurs.

Furthermore, this research demonstrates the value of utilizing comparative analyses to identify best practices and areas for improvement. Although Vietnam's policies set a commendable standard, inconsistencies in legal frameworks and enforcement across ASEAN countries highlight the opportunity for greater regional collaboration. By aligning gender-oriented policies, member states can create a more supportive and cohesive environment for women in business, facilitating cross-border initiatives and knowledge sharing.

Moving forward, it is essential that future research adopts empirical methods — such as stakeholder interviews and case studies — to evaluate the real-world effectiveness of these legal frameworks. Additionally, an investigation into the business success rates of women entrepreneurs under these laws would provide an insightful measure of policy impact.

In conclusion, while Vietnam's leadership in gender-focused business policies is noteworthy, continued efforts are necessary to ensure that these policies translate into meaningful support for women entrepreneurs. A concerted commitment to both policy improvement and collaborative efforts among ASEAN nations will be crucial in fostering an environment where female entrepreneurship can thrive, ultimately contributing to the economic growth and social advancement of the region.

The study employs a document analysis methodology, which, while valuable, introduces certain limitations. The reliance on legislative texts

and existing literature may not fully capture the complexities of policy impacts or the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs. Some interpretations regarding the effectiveness of these policies would benefit from empirical evidence, including stakeholder interviews and case studies. Engaging directly with female entrepreneurs and relevant stakeholders could provide deeper insights into how laws affect business operations and identify specific areas where policies fall short.

For instance, measuring policy effectiveness through indicators like business success rates, financial performance, or levels of entrepreneurial engagement among women would strengthen the findings and provide a clearer picture of the efficacy of Vietnam's gender-oriented policies. Such qualitative and quantitative evidence would complement the existing data, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the translation of policy into practice.

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