

# Indonesia's Strategic Rationale for Championing the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework

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## Abstract

Indonesia's vigorous support of the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework (AGMSF) presents a compelling paradox. Despite possessing a comprehensive domestic legal architecture for gender equality, its championing of a regional framework appears redundant. This article argues that the apparent contradiction reflects a dual-track strategy in which regional norm-building is used to reinforce domestic governance while enhancing Indonesia's standing in ASEAN. It examines Indonesia's framing of the AGMSF, the factors shaping the translation of regional commitments into national practice, and how global gender norms are articulated alongside locally grounded ethical narratives. The article adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical design grounded in constructivist International Relations. Data come from analysis of the AGMSF, Indonesian and ASEAN policy documents and official statements, and relevant scholarly and policy literature. Qualitative content analysis, supported by selective discourse analysis, is used to trace dominant themes and justifications. Findings show that Indonesia positions itself as a norm entrepreneur and presents the

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AGMSF as a non-coercive, capacity-building vehicle for localizing global gender equality principles to fit the ASEAN Way. It is also framed as an external lever for peer learning and reputational incentives to address persistent implementation gaps at home. The article concludes that the AGMSF is a strategic supplement rather than a redundant policy layer. It contributes to limited scholarship on ASEAN gender governance by linking norm entrepreneurship, regional institutionalism, and value negotiation. The findings imply that regionally resonant frameworks can strengthen domestic implementation and call for future comparative and field-based research across member states.

### **Keywords**

ASEAN, Indonesian foreign policy, gender mainstreaming, norm localization, constructivism

### **Introduction**

Over the past decade, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has increasingly turned its attention to a range of social and economic issues, including gender equality. This marks a notable evolution from ASEAN's early years, when its primary focus was political security and the containment of communism (Keling et al. 2011). A key milestone in this shift was the adoption of the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework (AGMSF) 2021–2025, which outlines programs and mechanisms for integrating gender perspectives across ASEAN's member states and institutional structures. The framework also establishes a high-level Steering Committee (AGMSC), an operational Focal Team (GMFT), and a network of embedded Gender Focal Points (GFPs). Together, these bodies pursue four mutually reinforcing strategic objectives: 1) reforming ASEAN's internal policies and culture, 2) building technical gender knowledge and capacity, 3) ensuring policies reflect women's voices through engagement with civil society organizations, and 4) supporting gender mainstreaming initiatives at the Member State level (ASEAN 2021).

Indonesia was central to the development and early momentum of this framework. During its chairmanship of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Women (AMMW) in 2021 (ASEAN 2025), Indonesia emerged as a principal architect and advocate of the AGMSF, championing it as a key mechanism for harmonizing regional policies on women's economic empowerment and the prevention of gender-based violence. Its diplomatic leadership unfolded through a series of milestones culminating in the framework's formal endorsement and initial implementation. The groundwork for the AGMSF was first laid during the second AMMW in the Philippines in 2015, where Indonesia joined the joint statement supporting its initiation. This early commitment gained real traction when Indonesia assumed the AMMW chairmanship in 2021, a role that helped drive the AGMSF toward formal adoption by ASEAN leaders and marked the beginning of the framework's first implementation phase. Building on this progress, the 2nd ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Conference was held in Yogyakarta on Tuesday, July 4, 2023 (KemenPPPA 2023).

This proactive regional stance, however, presents a compelling analytical puzzle. At first glance, Indonesia's vigorous advocacy for a regional gender framework appears at odds with its domestic policy landscape. For decades, Indonesia has built what appears to be a robust national architecture for gender equality. This includes the early ratification of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) through Law No. 7 of 1984, which provides a foundational international legal commitment (United Nations 2025). The cornerstone of its domestic strategy is Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2000 on Gender Mainstreaming in National Development (Inpres 9/2000), a far-reaching mandate requiring all government ministries and agencies to integrate gender perspectives throughout the policy cycle—from planning and budgeting to implementation and evaluation (United Nations Development Programme 2025). This framework has been reinforced by additional laws and regulations addressing domestic violence (Law No. 23/2004), human trafficking

(Law No. 21/2007), and, most recently, sexual violence crimes (Law No. 12/2022), alongside numerous local and provincial regulations aimed at operationalizing national commitments (United Nations Development Programme 2025).

This raises a critical question: if the domestic legal and policy foundation is so comprehensive, why would Indonesia invest significant diplomatic capital in championing a regional framework like the AGMSF? This paper argues that the apparent paradox reflects a sophisticated, coherent dual-track strategy. Indonesia's support for the AGMSF serves both its foreign policy ambitions and its domestic governance agenda. Rather than replacing national policy, the framework functions as a strategic supplement, one designed to help address the profound and persistent gap between *de jure* commitments and *de facto* realities in Indonesia.

Although gender mainstreaming is now widely endorsed in development and governance, a growing body of scholarship argues that its implementation is often more symbolic than transformative. Critics note that bureaucratic, checklist-style approaches can depoliticize gender agendas and reduce them to technocratic routines, weakening their capacity to challenge entrenched power relations (Mukhopadhyay 2016; Rai and Grant 2023). Others highlight a persistent tension between formal equality frameworks and the need to address structural and contextual gender differences (Walby 2005). At the international level, studies of policy diffusion and institutional adoption similarly show that commitments to gender equality frequently outpace implementation, producing gaps between normative promises and practices on the ground (Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002; True 2003). Within this broader state of the art, recent work also emphasizes the role of norm entrepreneurs—actors who push ideas, shape discourse, and build alliances across borders—as crucial to translating gender commitments into institutional change (Caglar, Prügl, and Zwingel 2013).

In Southeast Asia, however, research on gender mainstreaming remains comparatively limited and tends to concentrate on national development strategies rather than regional policy alignment. For example, Syukri (2023) discusses Indonesia's efforts to integrate gender into development planning but does not examine how national initiatives interact with ASEAN-level frameworks. This omission is increasingly significant given the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework (AGMSF), a recent effort to institutionalize gender perspectives across all three ASEAN Community pillars (ASEAN 2021). Early policy-oriented assessments suggest uneven administrative readiness and substantial variation in gender sensitivity across member states (UN Women 2022), while foundational perspectives remind us that gender equality cannot be reduced to quantitative indicators alone but must involve substantive empowerment and shifts in agency (Kabeer 2005). Yet rigorous academic analysis of how the AGMSF is interpreted, operationalized, and contested within member states is still sparse.

This literature points to a clear research gap: we still know too little about how ASEAN member states, particularly Indonesia, translate regional commitments such as the AGMSF into national policy and practice, and how domestic and regional norm entrepreneurs shape this process. Existing studies rarely examine the institutional linkages between regional frameworks and local implementation mechanisms, or the ways gender equality norms might be negotiated alongside locally grounded ethical frameworks, including *maqasid shariah* or indigenous values. As a result, the relationship between regional gender governance and domestic political realities remains under-theorized and empirically underexplored.

This paper addresses that gap by examining an apparent paradox that also functions as the study's central research problem: why does Indonesia invest significant diplomatic capital in advancing a regional gender mainstreaming framework when it already possesses a relatively comprehensive national legal and policy architecture?

Accordingly, this study has three objectives: first, to analyze how Indonesian state actors and policy entrepreneurs, such as KemenPPPA and ASEAN-linked gender institutions, frame and operationalize the AGMSF within national policy processes; second, to identify the political, administrative, and normative factors that shape the translation of regional commitments into domestic outcomes; and third, to explore how universal gender equality norms intersect with locally rooted ethical frameworks in Indonesia's policy discourse and implementation practices. The contribution of the study is twofold.

Empirically, this article offers one of the few focused examinations of the AGMSF's domestication through the Indonesian case. Theoretically, it advances debates on gender mainstreaming by linking norm entrepreneurship, regional institutionalism, and value negotiation, thereby moving beyond procedural evaluation toward a more grounded understanding of how gender governance is made meaningful or rendered hollow in Southeast Asia.

## **Method**

This study uses a qualitative research design with a descriptive-analytical approach to examine why Indonesia invested significant diplomatic effort in championing the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework (AGMSF). The research addresses a central puzzle: how and why a state with an established domestic legal framework for gender equality nonetheless prioritized a regional gender mainstreaming agenda. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it enables close interpretation of meanings, motivations, and institutional narratives that cannot be captured through material or quantitative explanations alone.

In terms of research type, the analysis is grounded in a constructivist perspective in International Relations, which highlights how norms, ideas, and identity shape state interests and behavior (Checkel 1998; Hoffmann 2010). This lens is particularly useful for understanding cooperation in ASEAN's non-coercive

institutional context, where consultation, consensus, and capacity-building remain central to norm diffusion (Park 2005; U.S. Mission to ASEAN 2022). Within this framework, the study examines Indonesia as a norm entrepreneur that promoted the AGMSF by framing it as aligned with ASEAN's priorities and values (Wunderlich 2020). The AGMSF is also interpreted through the concept of norm localization, in which global gender norms are adapted to fit regional political and cultural conditions rather than adopted wholesale (Acharya 2004). This dynamic is reflected in the AGMSF's emphasis on guidance, capacity-building, and flexibility across varied national starting points.

For data collection, the study relies primarily on document analysis and a review of secondary sources. The dataset includes official ASEAN and Indonesian government documents, statements, and press releases on the AGMSF; the AGMSF text and related institutional materials; scholarly literature on constructivism, ASEAN institutionalism, Indonesian foreign policy, and gender mainstreaming; and analytical reports from reputable international organizations, news outlets, and think tanks. The empirical focus covers the period surrounding the AGMSF's emergence, negotiation, adoption, and early implementation within the 2021–2025 cycle.

For data analysis, the study applies qualitative content analysis, supplemented by selective discourse analysis. The collected texts are examined systematically to identify recurring themes, policy rationales, and narrative patterns in how Indonesia and ASEAN institutions justify the AGMSF. Particular attention is given to the ways Indonesian actors frame regional leadership as a means of strengthening domestic implementation, despite the existence of long-standing national gender policy commitments. These findings are interpreted through the constructivist concepts of norm entrepreneurship and norm localization to explain how ideational factors shape Indonesia's interests and support regional consensus on a sensitive governance agenda.

## **Results**

### ***The Domestic Context: Indonesia's Gender Mainstreaming Architecture and Its Implementation Gap***

To fully grasp the strategic impetus behind Indonesia's regional advocacy for the AGMSF, one must first dissect its domestic situation. On paper, Indonesia boasts one of the most comprehensive legal and policy frameworks for gender equality in Southeast Asia. This architecture, built over several decades, signals a strong state commitment to the principles of non-discrimination and women's empowerment. However, a stark and persistent gap between these formal policies and their real-world implementation reveals a story of unfulfilled potential and deep-seated structural challenges. It is this implementation deficit that forms the core domestic driver for Indonesia's external, region-focused strategy.

Indonesia's formal commitment to gender equality is multi-layered and extensive, anchored in international conventions and operationalized through national mandates (ASEAN 2025b). Table 1 provides a structured overview of the key legal instruments that constitute this framework.

**Table 1. Indonesia’s National Gender Equality Legal and Policy Framework**

Instruments	Full Titles	Key Objectives	Sources
Law No. 7/1984	Ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)	Establishes the primary international and national legal basis for non-discrimination against women and the support of gender equality.	United Nation (2025)
Presidential Instruction No. 9/2000	Gender Mainstreaming in National Development (Inpres 9/2000)	Mandates the integration of gender perspectives into the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of all national development policies and programs across all government sectors.	United Nation (2025)

Table 1. (Continued)

Instruments	Full Titles	Key Objectives	Sources
Law No. 23/2004	Elimination of Domestic Violence	Provides a legal framework for preventing domestic violence, protecting victims, and prosecuting perpetrators, defining domestic violence as a public crime.	United Nations Development Programme (2025)
Law No. 21/2007	Eradication of the Crime of Trafficking in Persons	Establishes a legal basis for combating human trafficking, with a focus on protecting victims, particularly women and children.	United Nations Development Programme (2025)

Table 1. (Continued)

Instruments	Full Titles	Key Objectives	Sources
Law No. 12/2022	Sexual Violence Crime Law	Provides a comprehensive legal framework for preventing and handling cases of sexual violence, ensuring victims' rights, and establishing a more victim-centered justice process.	United Nations Development Programme (2025)
Various <i>Perda</i> (Regional Regulations)	e.g., Regional Regulation No. 1 of 2017 on Gender Mainstreaming	Aims to operationalize national gender mainstreaming mandates at the provincial and district levels, providing local governments with a legal basis for gender-responsive planning and budgeting.	BPK (2017)

The centerpiece of this architecture is Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2000 (Inpres 9/2000). This instruction is not merely a statement of principle but a direct order to the entire state apparatus, from central ministries to local governments, to adopt gender mainstreaming as a core strategy (United Nation 2025). It necessitates the creation of gender focal points, the development of gender-responsive budgets, and the use of gender analysis in policymaking. The existence of numerous local regulations, such as the *Peraturan Daerah* (Regional Regulation) No. 1 of 2017 on Gender Mainstreaming found in various districts, demonstrates the attempt to cascade this national mandate down to the sub-national level, although this also highlights the decentralized and often inconsistent nature of policy implementation across the archipelago (BPK 2017). This impressive *de jure* framework seemingly equips Indonesia with all the necessary tools to advance gender equality.

Despite this robust legal foundation, a wealth of empirical data reveals a profound and persistent failure of implementation. The ambitious goals of Inpres 9/2000 and related laws have not translated into substantive, widespread improvements in the lives of most Indonesian women. This chasm between policy intent and practical reality is evident across economic, political, and social spheres.

A critical indicator of this structural failure is the stagnation of the Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP) rate. For over two decades, while Indonesia has made significant strides in closing the gender gap in education and has seen fertility rates decline, the FLFP rate has remained stubbornly flat at around 53%. This contrasts sharply with the male participation rate of approximately 82-83%, creating one of the largest gender gaps in labor participation in the region (World Bank, n.d.-a). This stagnation is particularly telling because it defies economic logic; a more educated female population should, in theory, lead to higher participation in the workforce (World Bank, n.d.b). The primary reason for this disconnection is the immense and unequally distributed burden of unpaid care and domestic work (World Bank, n.d.a). Data shows that women constitute the vast

majority of those engaged primarily in housekeeping, effectively barring many from the formal labor market. The “work-care nexus” has become a primary constraint, forcing many women to drop out of the labor force after marriage and childbirth (World Bank, n.d.a). This suggests that Indonesia’s challenge has shifted from a supply-side problem (educating women) to a demand-side and socio-cultural one (transforming workplaces and societal norms to accommodate working women).

Within the economy, women face pervasive wage gaps and labor market segregation. On average, a woman’s wage is only 77-78% of a man’s, a gap that can widen significantly in specific sectors (World Bank, n.d.b). In 2024, the average male salary was approximately 28% higher than the female salary. Women are disproportionately concentrated in the informal economy, where wages are lower and social protections are non-existent (World Bank, n.d.b). Even in entrepreneurship, where women own an estimated 60% of all Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), they are overwhelmingly concentrated in the “micro” segment (World Bank, n.d.a). Their aspirations for growth are systematically hindered by lower access to credit and markets compared to their male counterparts (ASEAN 2022). This is often compounded by contradictory legal interpretations and traditional norms that, in practice, limit a woman’s ability to use assets as collateral without her husband’s involvement, despite laws guaranteeing equal rights (World Bank, n.d.b).

In the political sphere, affirmative action policies have yielded disappointing results. Despite a law mandating a 30% quota for female candidates on political party lists, women’s representation in the national parliament (DPR) has remained low, increasing from 11% in the 2004-2009 period to only 21.9% after the 2024 elections—still far short of the target and insufficient to create a critical mass for policy change (Gender Equity Unit 2024).

Thus, the Indonesian domestic context is defined by a paradox of its own: a progressive and comprehensive legal framework rendered largely ineffective by deep-seated implementation challenges. These

challenges are not merely technical or administrative; they are rooted in structural economic barriers, restrictive socio-cultural norms, and inconsistent political will (United Nations 2025). This persistent domestic failure creates a powerful incentive for the Indonesian state to look beyond its borders. Unable to fully resolve these issues through domestic policy alone, Jakarta has turned to the regional arena, seeking to use the institutional mechanisms of ASEAN as an alternative, supplementary lever for change. The AGMSF becomes a tool to build external momentum and create a normative environment that can, it is hoped, flow back to catalyze the very domestic reforms that have proven so elusive.

## **Discussion**

### ***Deconstructing Indonesia's Strategic Rationale: Five National and Regional Interests***

Indonesia's championing of the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework (AGMSF) is underpinned by a multi-faceted strategic rationale that aligns seamlessly with its core national interests. While presented in the language of regional cooperation and normative progress, the push for the AGMSF is a calculated endeavor to generate tangible economic, political, and social returns for Indonesia and the region. The challenges Indonesia faces in gender equality are not unique; they are mirrored, to varying degrees, across all ASEAN member states. This shared predicament provides fertile ground for a collective, institutional approach. Table 2 offers a snapshot of the regional gender equality landscape, providing the empirical context for Indonesia's strategy.

**Table 2. Comparative Gender Equality Indicators in ASEAN Member States (c. 2023-2024)**

Country	Female Labor Force Participation Rate (%)	Women in National Parliament (Lower/Single House, %)	Women in Ministerial Positions (%)	Women in Senior/Managerial Roles (%)	Global Gender Gap Index Rank (2024)
Brunei Darussalam	55.4	9.1	8.3	38.0	99
Cambodia	69.5	20.8	10.3	21.0	92
Indonesia	53.3	21.9	12.5	32.4	100
Lao PDR	56.0	22.1	10.5	24.0	54
Malaysia	51.6	14.9	15.8	40.0	103
Myanmar	41.5	16.3	2.9	28.0	123
Philippines	47.2	27.3	18.2	48.6	25
Singapore	61.6	29.3	14.3	41.0	49
Thailand	59.2	15.8	15.8	42.0	74
Vietnam	68.5	30.3	11.1	24.0	72

Sources: Data compiled and synthesized from multiple sources including the World Economic Forum, UN Women, ASEAN, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and The Global Economy (Gender Equity Unit 2024).

The data reveals a region of stark contrasts. While countries like the Philippines and Singapore perform well on some indicators, the ASEAN as a whole struggles with low female political representation

and significant gaps in economic participation. Indonesia sits squarely in the middle of this pack, facing challenges common to its neighbors. This shared context validates the need for a regional framework and illuminates Indonesia's strategic interests in leading its development.

### **Unlocking the growth dividend: women's economic empowerment, MSMEs, and the care economy**

Indonesia's first interest can be identified in the untapping economic potential of gender equality. The most compelling driver for Indonesia's support of the AGMSF is the immense, untapped economic potential of gender equality. For a region focused on growth and development, the economic case is overwhelming. A landmark study by the McKinsey Global Institute estimates that advancing women's equality could add a staggering \$4.5 trillion to the collective annual GDP of the Asia-Pacific region by 2025, a 12% increase over a business-as-usual trajectory (McKinsey and Company 2018). Another projection suggests that closing the global gender gap in entrepreneurship could boost global GDP by \$2.5 trillion to \$5 trillion (ASEAN 2022). For Indonesia and its neighbors, these are not abstract numbers; they represent the single largest opportunity for future economic growth. The AGMSF, by promoting women's economic empowerment, is a direct strategy to unlock this prize.

A core component of this strategy is tackling low labor force participation, high informality, and female entrepreneurship. Minister of Manpower, Ida Fauziyah, emphasized: "Our labor force participation rate shows that women's participation is still below that of men. Moreover, many women are unemployed. This means we have a task to provide equal opportunities to men and women" (ANTARA News 2022). Echoing this perspective, Deputy Speaker of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR RI), Lestari Moerdijat, noted that "when health and well-being are ensured within the family environment, various efforts to enhance women's capacity to play active roles across multiple sectors can become more accessible and

effective” (Artanti 2024). In this context, women own a majority of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in many parts of the region, forming the backbone of local economies. In Indonesia, women own about 60% of MSMEs (ASEAN 2022). However, these businesses are disproportionately stuck at the micro-level, unable to scale up due to systemic barriers, most notably a lack of access to finance and technology (ASEAN 2022). The AGMSF and related ASEAN initiatives, such as the Declaration on Unlocking Women’s Entrepreneurship, directly target these barriers by promoting financial and digital literacy and advocating for more inclusive financial systems (U.S. Mission to ASEAN 2022). By helping women-led businesses grow, Indonesia is not only pursuing a social goal but is also fostering a more dynamic and resilient regional economy.

Thus, any serious attempt to boost women’s economic participation must address the foundational issue of the unpaid care economy. Across ASEAN, women perform “more than double” the amount of unpaid care and domestic work as men (UN Women 2024). This “double burden” is a primary driver of low female LFPR and a significant brake on economic growth (UK International Development 2024). While the AGMSF may not legislate changes in household dynamics, its holistic, mainstreaming approach promotes the development of supportive infrastructure (such as affordable childcare) and workplace policies (like parental leave) that can help redistribute the care burden (World Bank, n.d.a). By creating a regional dialogue on the importance of the care economy as mentioned in the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Framework, it helps legitimize public and private investment in these areas, which is an essential prerequisite for unlocking the full economic potential of the region’s women.

### **Advancing women’s political leadership through the AGMSF**

The second interest is Indonesia’s push on ASEAN beyond economics to the core of regional political stability. A central tenet of democratic and development theory holds that inclusive governance

is a prerequisite for long-term stability and public trust. Across ASEAN, women remain severely underrepresented in the corridors of power, creating a significant “representation deficit” that can lead to less responsive policies and undermine political legitimacy. In 2023, women held a mere 23% of seats in national parliaments across the region, a figure that lags behind the global average of 27% (UN Women 2024). The numbers are often even lower for ministerial and senior leadership positions, where women are frequently relegated to “soft” portfolios like social affairs or women’s issues, while men dominate powerful ministries like finance, defense, and foreign affairs (UN Women 2022).

This political exclusion has tangible consequences. A growing body of evidence suggests a strong correlation between higher female political participation and positive governance outcomes. Studies indicate that greater representation of women in politics is linked to lower levels of corruption, increased investment in social sectors like health and education, more collaborative and bipartisan policy-making, and more durable peace agreements (UN Women 2025). The active role of women in peace processes in conflict-affected areas like Mindanao in the Philippines and in Myanmar serves as a powerful regional case study (UN Women 2022). In a region as diverse and complex as Southeast Asia, which grapples with issues ranging from ethnic conflict and democratic backsliding to environmental degradation, policies that are formulated without the perspectives of half the population are inherently less robust and more likely to fail (UN Women 2022). This can erode public trust in government and, in the long run, contribute to political instability (Eswaran 2019).

The AGMSF serves as a normative instrument to address this deficit. One of the framework’s priority areas is explicitly “women in public leadership and politics” (ASEAN 2024). It functions as an institutional mechanism to promote this agenda through non-confrontational means that are compatible with the ‘ASEAN Way’. By establishing a regional benchmark and encouraging the sharing

of best practices, the framework can catalyze domestic action. For example, it can highlight the effectiveness of tools like well- designed gender quotas, which have been shown globally and regionally to significantly increase the proportion of women elected. While ASEAN cannot impose such quotas, the AGMSF provides a platform to socialize the idea and demonstrate its benefits, encouraging member states to voluntarily adopt similar measures. For instance, despite having a 30% quota, numerous research mentioned that Indonesia's progress has been slow, while Timor-Leste's use of quotas has resulted in one of the highest rates of female representation in the region, offering a valuable lesson (IPU Report 2025).

The advancement of gender equality in Southeast Asia increasingly requires a coordinated and regional approach. As Lenny Rosalin emphasized during the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework (AGMSF) forum in July 2023: "Through collaboration between ASEAN and its partners, we can push for sustainable changes, improve gender equality, and empower women and children in all aspects of life." This highlights that transformative impact can only be achieved through collective regional action rather than isolated national efforts (ASEAN 2024). Echoing this, she further stressed the importance of institutional commitment, stating that "raising awareness within each sectoral body and across sectors in every ASEAN community is essential to accelerate the implementation of the AGMSF" (Mahrofi 2023) Reinforcing this agenda, the ASEAN Secretariat has also acknowledged that "Gender equality through the care economy" is essential at the regional level to address post-pandemic challenges and broader social transformation (ASEAN 2025). The integration of a care economy within ASEAN's framework is seen as a strategic lever to deliver tangible, inclusive benefits across member states. For Indonesia, fostering a region of stable, inclusive, and responsive governments is a primary foreign policy objective. Political instability in any member state can have spillover effects that threaten regional security and economic prosperity. By championing a framework that

promotes more inclusive governance, Indonesia is investing in the long-term stability of its neighborhood, which is essential for its own security and development. The AGMSF is thus a tool of preventative diplomacy, aiming to strengthen the political fabric of the region from within by making its governing structures more representative of the populations they serve.

### **Cultivating gender-inclusive human capital for ASEAN's global competitiveness**

The third interest is Indonesia's push on cultivating regional human capital for Global Competitiveness. In the 21st-century global economy, a nation's or region's greatest asset is its human capital. Competitiveness is increasingly driven by knowledge, innovation, and a highly skilled workforce (Bangun 2022). Indonesia's advocacy for the AGMSF is deeply rooted in the strategic understanding that ASEAN cannot afford to underutilize the talent of half its population if it hopes to remain competitive on the world stage (United Nations 2025).

ASEAN has achieved remarkable success in closing gender gaps in basic education, with many countries reaching parity in primary and secondary school enrollment (United Nation 2025). However, this success masks critical deficiencies at higher levels, particularly in the fields that will define the future of work: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). Across ASEAN, there is a substantial gender gap in STEM higher education. On average, while nearly 40% of male graduates earn STEM degrees, the figure for female graduates is only 19.3% (ASEAN 2022). This disparity is particularly stark in fields like engineering and ICT, while women are better represented in health sciences and natural sciences (OECD 2021). This disparity translates directly into the workforce. Despite women in Southeast Asia being better represented in the technology sector (32%) than the global average, they remain a distinct minority, holding only 12% of Chief Technology Officer (CTO) positions in

the region and being significantly underrepresented in engineering and automation roles (ASEAN 2022)

This “leaky pipeline” of female talent in STEM represents a critical strategic vulnerability for the region (UNESCO 2021). As economies transition towards digitalization, green energy, and advanced manufacturing, a failure to cultivate a diverse talent pool will inevitably lead to skills shortages and a loss of innovative potential (Elias 2020). Companies with greater gender diversity in leadership are consistently shown to be more innovative and profitable, yet ASEAN is not fully capitalizing on this advantage.

The AGMSF and its associated initiatives are designed to address this human capital challenge directly. The framework calls for mainstreaming gender in education and human resource development, which includes promoting equal access to vocational training, breaking down gender stereotypes that discourage girls from pursuing STEM careers, and creating more inclusive workplaces in traditionally male-dominated sectors (ASEAN 2022). By fostering a regional dialogue and encouraging national policies that support women’s participation in STEM, through scholarships, mentorships, and promoting role models, the AGMSF aims to build a larger, more skilled, and more innovative workforce for the entire ASEAN community. This is not merely a social justice issue; it is an economic imperative. For Indonesia, as the region’s largest economy, ensuring that ASEAN as a whole develops its human capital to the fullest extent is crucial for maintaining regional growth momentum, attracting high-value investment, and securing a competitive edge in the global economy. The AGMSF is an investment in the future talent pool of the region. Strengthening gender equality is increasingly recognized by Indonesian leaders as a critical driver of national and regional development. Minister of Finance, Sri Mulyani Indrawati, emphasized the macroeconomic benefits of gender inclusion, stating that “greater and better participation of women can reduce poverty and increase the size and growth of the economy” (Jurnas.com 2022). This perspective aligns with broader national

goals, including Indonesia's Vision 2045, as echoed by Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs, Airlangga Hartarto, who asserted that "expanding accessibility and opportunities for women" is essential to achieving sustainable development goals and enhancing the quality of Indonesia's human capital (Kementerian Koordinator Bidang Perekonomian 2024). At the regional level, Coordinating Minister for Human Development and Culture, Muhadjir Effendy, highlighted the urgency of incorporating gender perspectives into ASEAN's policy frameworks, stressing that "social protection programs and policies must be based on gender-based risk and vulnerability identification throughout the human life cycle"(Supanji 2023) Together, these statements underscore Indonesia's commitment to gender mainstreaming not only as a matter of social justice, but also as a cornerstone of economic growth, social resilience, and inclusive regional progress.

### **Harmonizing gender governance: regional standards, policy coherence, and Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN**

The fourth interest is Indonesia's push on harmonization, leadership, and global positioning, as gender mainstreaming has become a global issue, and it is imperative for the country to harmonize regional policies to overcome collective challenges. Beyond the direct economic and political benefits, Indonesia's strategy for the AGMSF is deeply embedded in a normative logic. The framework serves as a powerful instrument for shaping regional standards, asserting leadership, and positioning ASEAN as a progressive and relevant actor on the global stage. This normative dimension is twofold: it functions internally to harmonize policies within a diverse region and externally to project a cohesive and forward-looking identity to the world.

ASEAN is a region characterized by immense diversity. Its ten member states encompass a wide spectrum of legal systems (common law, civil law, and hybrids), levels of economic development, political structures, and socio-cultural norms (Tan 2018). While this diversity

is a source of richness, it also creates significant friction and poses collective action problems, particularly in addressing transnational issues like human trafficking or environmental degradation. Without a degree of policy harmonization, regional integration remains shallow, and shared challenges go unaddressed.

The AGMSF is explicitly designed as a harmonizing instrument. Its stated purpose is to help “harmonize policies” and allow member states to “establish standards together”. It achieves this not through legally binding directives, which would be rejected under the ‘ASEAN Way’, but through the creation of a common language, a shared set of goals, and a standardized set of indicators for gender mainstreaming. This allows national policymakers in ASEAN to align their domestic strategies with a mutually agreed-upon regional vision (ASEAN 2021). This process of voluntary alignment reduces policy divergence and creates a more coherent regional approach to shared problems.

A clear example of the need for such harmonization is the protection of female migrant workers. Indonesians, the majority of whom are women, constitute a significant portion of the migrant workforce in other ASEAN countries (World Bank, n.d.b). However, the legal protections and support systems for these workers are wildly inconsistent from one country to another, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and human trafficking (World Bank, n.d.b). A purely domestic policy in Indonesia can do little to protect its citizens once they are abroad. The AGMSF provides a platform to advocate for region-wide standards for the protection of female workers, encouraging host countries to adopt more robust policies that align with those of sending countries.

Furthermore, the framework institutionalizes the crucial function of sharing best practices. It creates a formal channel for member states to learn from one another’s successes and failures. The AGMSF documentation itself highlights successful national models, such as the Philippine Commission on Women’s extensive consultations with civil society in developing its national gender plan,

holding it up as an example for others to emulate (ASEAN 2021). This peer-to-peer learning, facilitated by the ASEAN institutional structure, is a core mechanism for building regional capacity and encouraging a “race to the top” rather than a “race to the bottom” on social policy standards. For Indonesia, a harmonized regional policy environment means a more predictable and stable neighborhood, reduced transnational threats, and a more level playing field for its businesses and workers.

### **Using the AGMSF to project ASEAN and Indonesia as progressive leaders**

The last interest is Indonesia’s interest in projecting ASEAN as a progressive global actor. In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, marked by intense competition between major powers, the unity, coherence, and international standing of ASEAN are more critical than ever (Lin 2022). The AGMSF serves a vital external function: it helps build regional and global legitimacy. By successfully conceiving and implementing a progressive social agenda like gender equality, ASEAN enhances its reputation as a mature, effective, and forward-looking regional organization (Yukawa 2018). This normative success strengthens its “convening power” and reinforces its claim to centrality in the wider Indo-Pacific regional architecture (ASEAN Philippines 2017). When ASEAN speaks with a coherent voice on issues of global importance, its influence is magnified.

This strategy also allows ASEAN to showcase a differentiated model of regionalism. The AGMSF demonstrates a unique, non-coercive approach to regional integration that stands in contrast to the top-down, legally-binding model of the European Union (Wulan, n.d.). The ‘ASEAN Way’ of promoting norms through consultation, consensus, and capacity-building can be presented as a viable and attractive alternative for other regions in the developing world (Yukawa 2018). It signals that progress on complex social issues can be achieved while respecting national sovereignty, a message that resonates widely (OECD 2021). The AGMSF is both an internal tool

for socializing member states toward a common standard and an external tool for signaling ASEAN's collective values to the rest of the world, particularly to key dialogue partners like the United States and the European Union, whose cooperation is often linked to such normative progress (U.S. Mission to ASEAN 2022).

Finally, for Indonesia, the leadership dividend is substantial. By taking the initiative to propose, draft, and champion the AGMSF, Indonesia solidifies its status as *primus inter pares* (first among equals) within the bloc (ASEAN 2025). It demonstrates its capacity to set the regional agenda on important 21st-century issues that go beyond traditional security concerns (ASEAN 2022). This act of normative leadership, visibly driven by institutions like the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection (KemenPPPA) through high-profile events and policy recommendations, translates directly into greater diplomatic influence across all three pillars of the ASEAN Community (ASEAN 2021). In essence, by helping ASEAN build its international reputation, Indonesia simultaneously enhances its own. The AGMSF is a vehicle for Indonesia to lead from the front, shaping the region's future in a way that reflects its values and serves its strategic interests (ASEAN 2024).

### ***Situating the Findings in Prior Scholarship***

This study set out to explain an apparent paradox: why Indonesia invests substantial diplomatic capital in advancing the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework (AGMSF) despite already possessing a relatively extensive national gender policy architecture. The analysis supports the paper's central claim that Indonesia's advocacy is best understood as a dual-track strategy: using a regional framework both to advance domestic implementation and to pursue wider regional and diplomatic objectives. This reading aligns with scholarship emphasizing the importance of norm entrepreneurs in converting broad commitments into institutional change (Caglar, Prügl, and Zwingel 2013). Indonesia, through state institutions and policy leaders, acts as a norm entrepreneur not simply by endorsing

gender equality rhetorically, but by embedding it in ASEAN's cross-pillar governance agenda.

At the same time, the findings should be interpreted alongside critical literature that warns gender mainstreaming can become symbolic or technocratic. Mukhopadhyay (2016) and Rai and Grant (2023) caution that mainstreaming often devolves into checklist-style routines that depoliticize gender agendas rather than transforming power relations. The AGMSF's emphasis on cross-sectoral indicators and administrative coordination could, if narrowly implemented, reproduce this very risk. Similarly, Walby's (2005) critique of the tension between formal equality frameworks and structural/contextual gender differences remains directly relevant: a regional approach can standardize commitments, but it can also flatten local realities unless implementation is attentive to inequality's varied forms.

The discussion also reinforces a core insight from work on policy diffusion and institutional adoption: normative commitments frequently outpace implementation, producing persistent gaps between promises and practice (Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002; True 2003). Early policy-oriented assessments of ASEAN's gender governance similarly point to uneven readiness and varying gender sensitivity across member states (UN Women 2022). Rather than contradicting those critiques, this study suggests Indonesia's push for the AGMSF is partly a strategic response to them, an attempt to use regional mechanisms (peer learning, reputational pressure, and technical cooperation) to narrow implementation gaps that national frameworks alone have not resolved (Syukri 2023). Finally, Kabeer's (2005) insistence that gender equality must be judged by substantive empowerment and agency, not only indicators, helps clarify what is at stake: the AGMSF can enable progress, but it cannot guarantee that progress will be meaningful unless empowerment is built into how success is defined and pursued.

### ***Theoretical and Practical Implications***

Theoretically, this analysis strengthens the case for viewing regional gender governance through the lens of strategic norm entrepreneurship. Indonesia's advocacy supports Caglar, Prügl, and Zwingel's (2013) argument that actors matter in translating norms into institutions, but it also refines it: entrepreneurship here is not only moral persuasion; it is also statecraft, where normative agendas are pursued because they align with economic growth, stability, and geopolitical legitimacy. At the same time, the study complicates overly optimistic readings of mainstreaming. Consistent with Mukhopadhyay (2016) and Rai and Grant (2023), the AGMSF can drift toward procedural compliance unless implementation remains politically attentive to power and inequality. Walby's (2005) warning about the limits of formal equality frameworks further implies that "harmonization" must not become homogenization.

Practically, the findings suggest several policy-relevant implications. First, if ASEAN's mainstreaming agenda is to generate economic gains, it must prioritize reforms that address the care economy and labor-market barriers—not only entrepreneurship training or programmatic targets (UN Women 2024; World Bank, n.d.a). Second, if inclusive governance is treated as a stability strategy, ASEAN forums should normalize evidence-based debate on tools such as quotas, candidate financing, and leadership pipelines while remaining sensitive to member states' political contexts (UN Women 2022; IPU Report 2025). Third, competitiveness-oriented mainstreaming should focus on STEM pathways and workplace inclusion, recognizing that education parity at basic levels does not resolve the higher-level segmentation that shapes future industries (ASEAN 2022; OECD 2021). Finally, ASEAN's credibility depends on narrowing the well-known commitment–implementation gap identified in diffusion scholarship (Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002; True 2003), which requires not only indicators but also institutional capacity, budget alignment, and meaningful participation of civil society.

### ***Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research***

Several limitations temper the conclusions. First, the discussion relies heavily on policy documents, official statements, and secondary indicators. While appropriate for analyzing strategy and institutional design, this approach cannot fully capture how the AGMSF is interpreted by implementers at the sectoral or local level, where mainstreaming often succeeds or fails in practice. Second, regional indicators and benchmarks, while useful for comparison, risk privileging what is measurable over what is meaningful, echoing Kabeer's (2005) critique that empowerment and agency are not reducible to quantitative metrics. Third, the analysis cannot make strong causal claims about the AGMSF's effects on outcomes such as women's representation or labor-force participation; it instead clarifies plausible mechanisms (peer learning, reputational pressure, coordination) that require further empirical testing. Fourth, ASEAN's diversity means that implementation pathways are likely to be highly contingent; findings about Indonesia's strategic rationale do not automatically generalize to other member states' motivations.

Future research would benefit from multi-sited fieldwork across ASEAN sectoral bodies, domestic ministries, and civil society networks to examine whether mainstreaming operates as transformative politics or as technocratic routine—directly engaging the concerns raised by Mukhopadhyay (2016) and Rai and Grant (2023). Comparative studies could also test whether Indonesia's dual-track strategy produces measurable differences in domestic implementation, and how regional norms are negotiated alongside locally grounded ethical frameworks (including *maqasid syariah* and indigenous values), an area that remains under-theorized in the current literature.

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## Conclusion

This study has answered its central objective by explaining why Indonesia invests diplomatic capital in advancing the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework (AGMSF) despite having a comparatively strong domestic gender policy architecture. The findings show that the “paradox” is better understood as a coherent dual-track strategy: Indonesia uses the AGMSF as an external lever to strengthen domestic implementation through peer learning, reputational incentives, and technical cooperation, while also advancing broader national interests tied to regional economic resilience, political stability, human-capital development, and diplomatic positioning. The case also supports a constructivist interpretation of regional governance in Southeast Asia: Indonesia operates as a norm entrepreneur, localizing global gender-equality principles into the consensual practices of the “ASEAN Way,” while ASEAN institutions function as norm diffusers that socialize shared standards internally and signal collective values externally.

The study’s conclusions should be read with several limitations in mind. Because the analysis relies primarily on document-based evidence and secondary sources, it captures official framing and institutional intent more clearly than the everyday political bargaining, bureaucratic capacity constraints, and contested implementation processes that shape outcomes on the ground. It also centers on Indonesia and the AGMSF’s early trajectory, limiting cross-country comparison and preventing firm claims about long-term impact. Future research should therefore triangulate this account with elite interviews, process tracing, and field-based implementation studies across relevant ministries and ASEAN sectoral bodies. Comparative work across multiple member states would clarify whether Indonesia’s approach is distinctive or representative of a broader ASEAN pattern of using regional governance to compensate for domestic implementation gaps. Finally, deeper empirical attention to how local ethical frameworks, such as *maqasid shariah*, *adat-*

based norms, and faith-based civil society discourses, interact with mainstreaming institutions would help determine when norm localization enables substantive empowerment and when it risks becoming another layer of procedural compliance.

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