

The role of regional governance on shaping trade and gender nexus policy in the pandemic and recovery:

Asia-Pacific practices and perspectives

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic caused challenges to public health systems and disruptions in international trade and society. This chapter will highlight the role of regional governance in complementing international governance in responding to global crises and addressing gender issues. The discussion concentrates on the Asia-Pacific region, including responses by individual economies and the regional organizations the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The findings show that policy measures responding to the pandemic are progressing dynamically. While policies are primarily concerned with the strength of public health systems and the stability of economic and social situations initially, they will focus on answering specific groups' needs, including women's challenges, at a later stage. Besides, comparing the actions between ASEAN and APEC indicates the difference in the governance approach to the trade and gender nexus; that is, the human rights-based versus the economic and technical cooperation (ECOTECH)-oriented approaches. Accordingly, this chapter argues that policy priority and institutional structure are crucial elements behind the diversity of regional governance on gender issues in the Asia Pacific. Finally, it suggests that the experiences of Asia-Pacific regional governance facilitate the understanding of dimensional and cross-cutting gender issues and provide insights into international governance of the trade and gender nexus.

Introduction

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, international society enhanced globalization, shaping the close interdependence of economic and social activities between economies. The liberalization of trade and investment and a rule-based trading system is essential to the operation and sufficiency of globalization. Nevertheless, the flows of international trade and investment were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic because of public health measures that mandated social distancing and restricted physical contact between people. Although public health measures were necessary to prevent infectious diseases and protect human life and health, they caused impacts on domestic consumption and cross-border movements of workforces and goods (APEC, 2020a; World Bank, 2020).

An important lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic is the need to strengthen the governance capacity of developing comprehensive policies concerning public health, economic and social purposes. On the other hand, the pandemic highlights the role of international trade

in maintaining the capacity of public health systems and strengthening economic activities' resilience. In addition, for those vulnerable during the pandemic, an open and resilient trading system could reduce the impacts of economic disruptions to support business operations and secure employment.

It is widely recognized that the female workforce and women-led businesses suffered more than male workers and men's businesses during the pandemic (Tang *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, international organizations such as the International Labour Organization and the World Bank suggested that women's economic participation is key to the pandemic recovery.

Fighting the pandemic and facilitating the recovery requires multi-level efforts, including multilateral mechanisms, regional governance and individual economies. This chapter concentrates on regional governance by exploring how regional organizations promoted gender-sensitive responses during the pandemic and for recovery. Because of the diversity of economic, social and cultural backgrounds of economies in the Asia Pacific, this chapter studies the experiences of the two regional organizations – the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

Three questions are critical to studying the role of regional governance in promoting gender-sensitive policies during the pandemic and for recovery. They are: how did Asia-Pacific economies take action in response to the pandemic and answer women's challenges during the pandemic? Second, how do APEC and ASEAN play a role in the pandemic, mainly how they address gender issues as part of the pandemic responses and their priorities for regional economic integration? Third, a comparative study is adopted to analyse the connection between economies' actions and regional organizations' priorities and the similarity and disparity of regional governance on trade and gender nexus between ASEAN and APEC.

Accordingly, this chapter is divided into three major parts. It starts with the landscape of policy responses by Asia-Pacific economies and analyses the similarity and differences. Regarding incomplete responses to women suffering from the pandemic, it explores the actions suggested by ASEAN and APEC. The findings lead us to propose several factors shaping the trade and gender nexus policy in the two regional organizations. Finally, we suggest the implications of Asia-Pacific experiences and regional governance on gender issues in shaping the framework of international governance on trade and gender.

Policy measures of Asia-Pacific economies in response to challenges faced by women during the COVID-19 pandemic

The Asia Pacific is a unique region compared with other regions primarily based on continents such as North America, Europe and Africa. That is because the geographical location of the Asia Pacific is ocean-centred and island-based. The Pacific Ocean is the geographical proxy by which these countries in the Pacific rim, including North and South Americas, Oceania, and North, South and East Asia, are conceptualized as a "region".

Except for the geographical location, the countries in the Asia Pacific share few common connections. The diversity of cultural backgrounds, economic development levels and social conditions lead to economic and political conflicts among Asia-Pacific economies. On the

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other hand, it motivates the experiments of innovative policies and political ideas (Beeson, 2009). The basis for capturing the regional perspective during the pandemic lies in the collection and analysis of pandemic response policy measures from APEC members.¹

Challenges to women’s economic participation in the Asia Pacific during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic caused severe challenges to international society, including the Asia-Pacific region. While international trade faces a decline in commodities, global trade of pandemic prevention-related products, medicines, computer equipment and integrated circuits instead welcomed growth. Furthermore, services sectors heavily dependent on person-to-person interaction, such as tourism, catering and accommodation, as well as services that cannot be provided through cross-border consumption using the Internet and digital systems, experienced a more significant contraction than other services sectors (CCSA, 2021). Although the trade in services experienced more significant setbacks than the trade in goods, the emphasis on enhancing the resilience and capacity of essential goods domestically also disrupted the global supply chain. Consequently, the global supply chain underwent restructuring and relocation, necessitating the existing supply chain network changes (APEC, 2021).

To a certain extent, the disruptions in services trade and the global supply chain explain the vulnerability of female workers and women-led businesses during the pandemic. First, women’s economic participation was more concentrated in services sectors before the pandemic. When the pandemic caused severe disruptions in services trade, it led female workforces and women-led businesses in the services sector to confront a higher risk of unemployment and bankruptcy.

Prior to the pandemic, there was a gradual increase in the gender ratio of economic participation in the Asia-Pacific region, accompanied by a narrowing gender gap in the workforce. Most women workers in the region were in services sectors, manufacturing and agriculture. In services sectors, up to 73 per cent of women in the Asia Pacific participated in health care, social work, catering, wholesale and retail (APEC, 2020b). Besides, business activities and jobs that women highly participated in have several characteristics, including the lower requirement of capital and technologies, the greater engagement of physical contact with consumers, and the higher reliance on domestic consumption (World Bank and WTO, 2020). Indeed, trade in services and the industries relying on people-to-people contacts, such as tourism, catering, wholesale and retail, were the industries that suffered more disruptions by the COVID-19 pandemic (Avdiu and Nayyar, 2020; Barkas *et al.*, 2020). Commercial activities in these sectors require more resources to transform existing delivery modes and business models to adapt to the contactless economy. However, the female workforce and women-led businesses in these sectors might lack sufficient digital

and financial capacity to adapt to the new economy (ILO, 2020). In other words, changes in women's economic participation before the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e. concentrating in services sectors and working with less adaption to the contactless environment) is one of the reasons why women face more challenges than men during the pandemic.

Secondly, gender inequality in economic and social structures existed before the pandemic. Before the pandemic, women frequently encountered stereotypes that confined them to care-giving roles rather than pursuing adventurous paths, and they were often perceived as less competent in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. The sociocultural environment, which was unsupportive of women, hindered their economic potential, resulting in disparities in unpaid household and care-giving responsibilities, working conditions and wages, access to markets and loans, as well as digital literacy and capacity. However, the level of gender inequality varies among countries. However, rather than diminishing, these inequalities were further aggravated during the pandemic. For example, numerous governments opted to close public establishments such as kindergartens, schools and care facilities as a measure to contain the spread of the pandemic. As a result, women faced challenges in accessing care services for children and elders (APEC, 2020b).

The disruption in caring services resulted in women's care burden being increased than before. Although a part of female workers could convert to remote office models, the percentage of overall female workers and the benefits of remote office models is debatable. Especially, the working-from-home model blurring the boundaries between work and family might have led women to suffer more burden of caring for family members than before. As a result, as McKinsey & Company and LeanIn (2020) studied, the proportion of full-time women workers forced to leave the workforce is higher than that of full-time working men forced to leave the workforce.

Concerning the higher unemployment and financial uncertainty faced by women during the pandemic, the next issue is how economies in the Asia Pacific took action to address these challenges.

Policy measures of Asia-Pacific economies in response to the pandemic and women's challenges

To explore the issue, we accessed the database created by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) during the pandemic. The database Global COVID-19 Gender Response Tracker, which monitored the COVID-19 policies adopted by governments worldwide, indicated gender-sensitive responses by four fields, including social protection, violence against women, economic and fiscal measures and the labour market, and collected the gender ratio of the special COVID-19 taskforce.² Based on information from the Global COVID-19 Gender Response Tracker, several findings of economies' actions in the Asia Pacific are worth discussing.

First, most pandemic responses were related to social protection, economic and fiscal measures and violence against women. The policies targeting the labour market were less than the former three fields. Specifically, social protection measures included subsidies and government support schemes for employees' care leave, releasing the caring burden of

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essential (service) workers and the suspension of social insurance responsibility on workers and corporations. As to the measures for the violence against women, most policies were to maintain existing services such as the operation of hotlines and notification mechanisms, the police and judicial system’s services addressing unreported or undisciplined violence, and shelter support. Regarding the economic and fiscal measures, the common measures included public loans and subsidies for enterprises and tax reduction/exemption for private sectors. However, Asia-Pacific economies seldom adopt the extension of credit or loan projects and renegotiation and reconstruction programmes. Table 1 shows the landscape of the pandemic responses in the region.

Another indicator of the gender sensitivity of pandemic responses by Asia-Pacific economies is female representativeness in the policymaking process.

Table 2 shows the female representativeness of COVID-19 taskforces in the Asia-Pacific region. The gender ratio of members of the special COVID-19 taskforce in the Asia Pacific is a disparity between developed and developing economies (see Table 2). In most developed economies, the gender ratio is over 30 per cent, except for Japan. By contrast, the gender ratio of the COVID-19 taskforce in most developing and newly industrialized economies is less than 15 per cent. In Chile and Hong Kong, China, it is higher.

Table 1: The landscape of gender-sensitive COVID-19 responses in the Asia-Pacific (Jan-Aug 2021)

APEC economies	Types of response			
	No. social protection measures (and %)	No. measures for violence against women (and %)	No. economic and fiscal measures (and %)	No. labour market measures (and %)
Developed economies	67 (40%)	38 (23%)	46 (28%)	15 (9%)
Newly industrial economies	33 (45%)	7 (9%)	21 (28%)	13 (18%)
Developing economies	128 (47%)	61 (23%)	40 (15%)	39 (15%)
Total	228 (45%)	106 (21%)	107(21%)	67(13%)

Source: Calculations based on data from the Global COVID-19 Gender Response Tracker.

Table 2: The gender ratio of the COVID-19 taskforce in the Asia Pacific (Jan-Aug 2021)

Selected APEC economies	Gender ratio
Australia	44%
Canada	47%
Chile	28%
China	12%
Hong Kong, China	40%
Japan	17%
New Zealand	45%
Papua New Guinea	0%
Peru	13%
Philippines	0%
Singapore	9%
Thailand	9%
United States	30%
Viet Nam	7%

Source: UNDP, Global COVID-19 Gender Response Tracker.

The result has a two-fold meaning. On the one hand, the gender ratio in the COVID-19 taskforce echoes the conception that the degree of gender equality positively relates to the level of economic development. Gender equality in developed economies is generally higher than in developing or least-developed economies. On the other hand, it warns that gender inequality in policymaking might worsen during the global crises because of the lack of female experts and representatives. While the gender ratio of COVID-19 taskforces in developed economies is higher than in developing economies, the ratio is much lower than the proportion of the female workforce in human health and social work, including in developed economies (Jones-Renaud *et al.*, 2020).

However, is there a positive correlation between the gender composition of the COVID-19 taskforce and the advancement of gender equality in these economies?

To explore this issue, we compared the finding with the Global Gender Equality Index of these Asia-Pacific economies. The finding shows a positive correlation between the gender ratio of the COVID-19 taskforce and the degree of gender equality in developed economies. In contrast, the positive correlation becomes less distinct in developing economies. However, a shared characteristic among these Asia-Pacific economies is that the representation of women in the COVID-19 taskforce is significantly lower than their participation in the labour force. This underrepresentation of women in the policymaking process for COVID-19 responses puts these economies at risk of inadequately addressing the challenges faced by women during the pandemic.

It is evident that economies in the Asia-Pacific region are committed to preserving economic and social stability amidst the pandemic by implementing various policy measures. Nevertheless, a significant portion of these measures falls short of adequately addressing the challenges faced by women. For instance, these measures did not propose solutions to the structural female labour participation in service industries and the gender gap in digital capacity and unpaid housework. Moreover, there is a lack of ensuring gender equality in policymaking in response to the pandemic. Women remain significantly underrepresented in public health relative to their share of regional healthcare workers.

Policy recommendations and collective activities in ASEAN and APEC

ASEAN and APEC are the two vital organizations in the Asia Pacific. However, the formation of these establishments represents diverse geographical and political perspectives within this region.

ASEAN was created in 1967 to protect and maintain regional peace and security. Its membership is Asia-centred, including Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam. While APEC was established in 1989, much later than ASEAN, its purpose was to promote trade and investment liberalization. While APEC aimed to broaden its membership beyond Asia, resulting in a larger and more inclusive organization compared to ASEAN, the latter enjoys a stronger sense of shared identity and greater cohesion among its members.³ The variances in geographical conception, membership composition, and institutional background significantly shape the pandemic responses and approaches towards addressing gender issues adopted by ASEAN and APEC.

ASEAN: gender inclusion, human security and disaster management

Due to its smaller membership size and shared ASEAN identity, ASEAN exhibited a more prompt response to the pandemic than APEC. The discrepancy in the speed of collective reactions is evident in the timing of the highest-level meetings conducted by the two regional organizations.

After the announcement of the COVID-19 pandemic by the World Health Organization, ASEAN leaders arranged a special summit to demonstrate cooperation and collaboration in fighting the pandemic. By contrast, APEC did not set a special meeting at the economic leaders' level during the initial pandemic. Instead, until the middle of 2021, under the leadership of the Host Economy, New Zealand, APEC economic leaders held an informal leaders' retreat to share their pandemic-response experiences and discuss opportunities for cooperation in the post-pandemic economic recovery.

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In the 2020 special summit, ASEAN members confirmed the role of ASEAN in assisting individual economies and cooperation with external partners such as private sectors and international organizations.⁴ Actions taken by ASEAN members include providing a transparent exchange of real-time information and pandemic response measures taken by members, sharing experiences and best practices in epidemiological research and development, and organizing regional cooperation for adequate provision of medicines and essential medical supplies and equipment.⁵ Furthermore, by recognizing “the unprecedented challenges posed by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic to lives and livelihoods and creating widespread demand and supply-side shocks” caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, ASEAN leaders instructed ASEAN members to use the whole-of-government, whole-of-society and whole-of-ASEAN efforts to address the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and other public health emergencies.⁶

The whole-of-government, whole-of-society and whole-of-ASEAN approach was manifested through various initiatives and tangible outcomes. They include: (i) establishing the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund to support members’ needs in responding to the pandemic; (ii) launching the ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies for Public Health Emergencies to strengthen the region’s capacity, resilience and enhanced preparedness to respond to current and future public health emergencies; (iii) adopting the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework and its Implementation Plan as a consolidated strategy for ASEAN to confront challenges from the COVID-19 crisis; (iv) creating the ASEAN Center for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases, which serves as a regional resource hub to strengthen ASEAN’s regional capabilities to prepare for, prevent, detect and respond to public health emergencies and emerging diseases. In the meantime, ASEAN members also concluded the Memorandum of Understanding on the Implementation of the Non-Tariff Measures on Essential Goods to sustain the regional economic integration and the supply chain of the goods.

Besides specific instruments for the global crisis, ASEAN leaders highlighted the importance of the continuous efforts of the existing plans, especially the ASEAN Community Vision 2025. Specifically, ASEAN and its members continued the ongoing work of three ASEAN Community Blueprints 2025, and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 remains (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016a, 2016b). Moreover, ASEAN leaders adopted the ASEAN Comprehensive Framework on Care Economy to guide ASEAN members to catch the opportunity in the post-pandemic recovery by building a stronger and more resilient economy.

Most of these policy instructions and recommendations by ASEAN are gender neutral, for instance, the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework and its Implementation Plan set the strategic plan for ASEAN members. These documents recognize the unequal impacts of COVID-19 on men and women. However, gender issues are intricately connected to macroeconomic policies and regional capacity. As ASEAN has demonstrated, gender issues are integral to ensuring human security. Consequently, concrete recommendations have been put forth, such as strengthening the integration of gender considerations in pandemic responses and emphasizing the importance of gender responsiveness in ASEAN’s recovery efforts. These documents underscore the commitment to addressing gender issues through a human rights-based approach. Therefore, while ASEAN recognized gender issues as crucial for building a resilient region, it has primarily approached these matters within the context of human rights.

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Following the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework and its Implementation Plan, several committees proposed detailed plans to address gender issues in the pandemic recovery. As a result, the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management adopted the ASEAN Regional Framework on Protection, Gender, and Inclusion in Disaster Management 2021-2025 to insert gender concerns into the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response. The ASEAN Regional Framework on Protection, Gender, and Inclusion in Disaster Management 2021-2025 was then established to chart a collective vision to advance inclusive disaster management and strengthen efforts related to gender and social inclusion. It also aims to facilitate the creation of indicators that measure progress in gender, protection, and inclusion, thereby addressing the ongoing pandemic and preparing for future pandemics (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021). However, it is worth noting that the gender issue addressed by the ASEAN Regional Framework on Protection, Gender, and Inclusion in Disaster Management 2021-2025 is primarily gender equality and women empowerment instead of promoting gender diversity (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021).

We can see that the ASEAN addressed women’s challenges during the pandemic from human security and social inclusion perspectives. The central point to facilitate gender-relevant policies is gender mainstreaming by the individual members and ASEAN as a whole, as ASEAN’s ministers on women stated in their joint statement in 2021. In other words, ASEAN is more concerned with the dimension of human rights and human security of gender issues.

APEC: women empowerment, inclusive growth, and trade and investment liberalization

Sharing the understanding with ASEAN leaders, APEC’s economic leaders acknowledged the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the most challenging health and economic crises in the contemporary era that caused disproportionate impacts on micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, women and others with untapped economic potential.⁷

However, APEC economic leaders did not give guidance on “inclusive economic policies” to ensure effective and equal participation in the economic recovery, nor did they agree on a strategic plan for all APEC forums and members. Instead, APEC economic leaders highlighted the continuous efforts of implementing the La Serena Roadmap for Women and Inclusive Growth (2019-2030) to enhance women’s empowerment.⁸ Accordingly, the initiatives implemented by APEC forums are key to crystalizing how APEC addresses gender issues during the pandemic and in response to the recovery.

The Economic Committee and the Policy Partnership on Women and the Economy (PPWE) are two forums crucial to map policy recommendations on gender issues during the pandemic. First, the Economic Committee explored the challenges to women’s empowerment before and

during the pandemic in the *2020 APEC Economic Policy Report* (APEC, 2020b). Within this report, the Economic Committee discussed gender-related issues and promoted the best practices of APEC members in promoting women's empowerment. The report especially emphasized the importance of capacity-building among APEC members to identify and implement structural reform policies that enable women to actively and equitably participate in economic activities during the post-pandemic recovery.

Secondly, the APEC Women and Economy Forum, a ministerial meeting arranged by the PPWE annually, suggested collective actions and cooperation on gender issues during the pandemic and recovery. Ministers at the APEC Women and Economy Forum stressed women's difficulties in the pandemic, including disproportionate job losses, participation in the informal sectors, unequal access to technology, inadequate financial incomes, an imbalance of unpaid care and domestic work, and rising gender-based violence.⁹ To address these difficulties, they urged APEC members to adopt gender-responsive approaches in domestic laws and policies to enhance inclusive, sustainable and equitable economic growth. Proposed measures included: (i) improving equality in the working environment, wages, employment and access to training for reskilling and upskilling; (ii) increasing women's leadership and decision-making positions in private sectors and in forming response and recovery measures; (iii) enhancing support for affordable and accessible care services to address unequal responsibilities of unpaid care and domestic work; and (iv) eliminating discrimination for women to engage in STEM. Moreover, sex-disaggregated data are essential to develop evidence-based gender policies and monitor their implementation.¹⁰

These actions reflect that APEC adopted a different approach to address women's challenges during the pandemic and the pandemic recovery. Rather than developing a new policy framework or strategic plan, APEC is more inclined to address these issues in the existing efforts and works, such as the La Serena Roadmap for Women and Inclusive Growth (2019-2030).

In addition, policy suggestions and initiatives promoted by APEC demonstrate that the central concern of gender issues is about economic and trade dimensions. In other words, APEC did not separate gender issues from economic and trade policies or place them in the context of human rights and human security. Instead, it paid attention to economic participation and empowerment for women by promoting cross-forum collaboration, concerned with the role of women in promoting trade liberalization, human resource development and inclusive growth in the region.

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The governance of gender issues by ASEAN and APEC: a human rights-based approach versus an ECOTECH-oriented approach

As analysed before, ASEAN and APEC approached gender issues during the pandemic and recovery from different dimensions. Specifically, ASEAN focused more on women's security and fundamental rights; APEC concentrated more on women's economic participation capacity. This section will discuss the reasons behind the difference in the governance of gender issues between ASEAN and APEC. To analyse the governance of gender issues within ASEAN and APEC, this chapter categorizes their approaches into human rights-based and economic and technical cooperation (ECOTECH)-oriented approaches.

Policy priority of regional organizations framing the context of gender issues

The policy priority plays a crucial role in achieving a shared understanding among members within a regional institution, as it is shaped by the institutional structure and mission. Consequently, we propose that the different governance of gender issues in ASEAN and APEC can be attributed to the variation in the policy priorities pursued by the two regional organizations.

The creation of ASEAN was a symbol of south regionalism in Asia in the 1960s. At that time, Southeast Asia economies were in a confrontation against the spread of communism. The political reality of the Cold War Era drove the idea of forming a regional security alliance for Southeast Asia economies against the spread of communism (Beeson, 2009; Pasha, 2022). The emphasis on peace and security within ASEAN's institutional mandate can be attributed to the influence of international relations and political considerations on its founding members. As stated in the 1967 Bangkok Declaration, the principle of equality and partnership underlies the necessity for collective action and regional cooperation.¹¹ Therefore, a peaceful community is central to ASEAN's policies. The adoption of the ASEAN Charter subsequently expanded the policy priority to economic, social and cultural dimensions.

The ASEAN Charter, adopted by ASEAN members in 2007, has two meanings (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). First, the document designates ASEAN as an inter-governmental organization with a legal personality and codifies the institutional structure for the operation and dispute settlement. As a result, this milestone marked the institutionalization of ASEAN and signified its evolution from a loose regional security alliance to a full-fledged inter-governmental organization. Additionally, the ASEAN Charter outlines the principles and priorities that all members are expected to adhere to. All ASEAN members must agree to the spirit of equality and partnership and comply with the principles of sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, non-interference, consensus and unity in diversity.¹² These principles are central to the ASEAN Centrality and the ASEAN Way. Moreover, the ASEAN Charter envisions the ASEAN Community with three pillars. The three pillars are the ASEAN Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community and the ASEAN Social-Cultural Community.¹³ Specifically, the pillar of the ASEAN Economic Community marked the expansion of ASEAN's policy priority into the economic and trade dimension (see Pasha, 2022).

However, expanding ASEAN's policy priorities does not mean that ASEAN members recognize the linkage between trade and gender policies. Instead, gender issues are addressed

within the framework of the ASEAN Social-Cultural Community. This context highlights the preference of ASEAN members for placing gender issues in the domains of human rights and human security.

Likewise, the formation of APEC can be attributed to the political dynamics among its founding members. Historical evidence indicates that APEC was established to promote the establishment of the WTO and serve as a platform for negotiations and leverage among major economic powers (Japan, the United States and the European Union) (Ravenhill, 2001). Nevertheless, unlike the common identity shared by ASEAN members, the diversity of economic, social and cultural conditions among APEC members implicates the internal conflicts between the Asia-central and Pacific-centred policies and between developing and developed economies. On the other hand, the complex conflicts among APEC members led APEC to distance itself from political issues such as regional security and concentrate on the liberalization of trade and investment.¹⁴

In the Seoul Ministerial Meeting in 1991, APEC founding members agreed to the principles of consensus and voluntarism central to the operation of APEC. They indicated the spirits of open regionalism and concreted unilateralism as crucial for APEC's trade agenda (APEC, 1994). However, these members did not confer legal personality upon APEC or fully institutionalize it as a formal organization. As a result, the institutional nature of APEC continues to be that of a loose policy forum (Elek, 1998; Ravenhill, 2001). Rudner (1994) argued that the institutional nature and the principles of consensus and voluntarism weaken the APEC's function as a photo opportunity or talk shop.

Later in 1994, APEC economic leaders announced a long-term goal to promote free and open trade and investment in the Asia-Pacific before 2020.¹⁵ The long-term goal and associated sub-topics are also called "Bogor Goals".¹⁶ Given the disparity of economic development among APEC members, there are three pillars to implement the Bogor Goals: trade and investment liberalization; facilitation of trade and investment; and ECOTECH.¹⁷

Compared to the other two pillars, the ECOTECH issue may appear unrelated to international trade and regional markets at first glance. As Yamazawa (1994) studied, during that period, developed members considered ECOTECH issues as complementary to the trade agenda. Consequently, they omitted ECOTECH issues from the discussion points of the Committee of Trade and Investment.¹⁸ By contrast, developing economies paid more attention to ECOTECH issues. They supported creating a specific committee to manage ECOTECH-relevant initiatives in a permeant and formal way, given ECOTECH issues concentrating on capacity building that can answer their development needs (Ravenhill, 2000). The tension between developed and developing economies on the ECOTECH agenda explains the uniqueness of the APEC Senior Officials' Meeting Steering Committee on Economic and Technical Cooperation (SCE). The representatives of APEC members joining the SCE meeting are senior officials instead of technical bureaucracy, unlike the Committee of Trade and Investment and the Economic Committee.

Nevertheless, APEC is also experiencing the expansion of its policy priority from the liberalization of trade and investment to non-trade issues such as structural reform. The shifts in APEC's policies prompted economic leaders to define the APEC agenda in 1996, emphasizing the pursuit of sustainable growth and equitable development.¹⁹ Specifically, the growth-oriented

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policy clarified the ECOTECH agenda as part of APEC’s policy priority. In other words, APEC approached gender issues by placing them in the ECOTECH agenda and concentrating on capacity building and empowerment for women’s economic activities.

Compared with the human rights-based approach by ASEAN, the ECOTECH approach seems to exemplify a model for trade and gender nexus policy. APEC’s high-level policy documents reflected this viewpoint. For instance, the 1996 APEC Economic Leaders’ Declaration instructed ministers to work with the private sector to find solutions to encourage the participation of women in APEC economies to implement the Bogor Goals and assigned ministers to pay more attention to the full participation of women in the economy.²⁰ Consequently, ministers exhibited a positive stance regarding the integration of gender issues into the mainstream of APEC initiatives.²¹

The institutional adjustment in response to the changing priorities of gender issues

While the policy priority of ASEAN and APEC frames the context of gender issues in their governance, the focus is not unchangeable. In the past years, ASEAN and APEC have been experiencing changes in the priority of gender issues to respond to the members’ needs and regional growth. The dynamic development of gender issues leads to the second point. Adjusting the institutional structure is a reason to initiate the changes in the gender policy and the result as well.

As to the gender policy in ASEAN, Davies (2016) indicates three phases for developing gender issues. The first two phases of gender policy are closely linked with the adjustment of ASEAN’s institutional structure.

In 1976, ASEAN created a subcommittee on women to concentrate on the linkage between gender and development. The 1988 Declaration of the Advancement of Women in the ASEAN region crystallized the development concern.²² It urged members to promote women’s role in national and regional development. Specific policy suggestions included ensuring the equitable and effective participation of women in all fields and at dimensions of the political, economic, social and cultural life of society and integrating concerns of women as a productive force, active agents in and beneficiaries of development in national policies. Furthermore, the 1988 Declaration emphasized the social dimension of gender issues, which is crucial in fostering fairer and more harmonious societies among ASEAN members.

The development concern of gender issues was then moved to the focus of human rights. That is the second phase of gender issues in ASEAN, starting from the 2004 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in the ASEAN Region.²³ The ASEAN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women clarified that human rights and fundamental freedoms are essential to protecting women against violence. By addressing the violence

against women, ASEAN members confirmed the concern of gender policy expanding to individuals' human rights, not limited to national and regional development. The 2004 Declaration suggested several vital areas for improving and protecting women's human rights, such as promoting sex-disaggregated data and gender mainstreaming, enhancing domestic laws and policies, eliminating all forms of discrimination against women and collaborating at different levels.

Besides the 2004 Declaration, the announcement of the ASEAN Community Vision also plays a key role in shaping the priority of gender policy in ASEAN. The ASEAN Community Vision followed the 2004 Declaration, confirming the human rights-based approach to gender issues and promoting them as part of the ASEAN Social-Cultural Community. According to the Blueprint for the ASEAN Social-Cultural Community, adopted in 2007, enhancing members' human and social development is essential to the ASEAN Community. Gender equality is one of the key priorities to achieve the ASEAN Social-Cultural Community blueprint, along with other priorities such as promoting and protecting fundamental freedoms, human rights and social justice.²⁴ It can be said that the ASEAN Social-Cultural Community's gender policy includes two parts: human development and human rights. The former is related to enhancing women's capacity to participate in social and economic activities;²⁵ the latter is concerned with women's well-being and social welfare.²⁶ The priorities echo the policy priority of ASEAN (i.e. development and security).

Different from the first phase, the adjustment of the institutional structure was a result of the changes in gender policy. As a result, ASEAN created two institutional arrangements to achieve the 2004 Declaration and the ASEAN Social-Cultural Community. One track is managed by the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Women, supported by the ASEAN Committee on Women. This track promotes initiatives and policies relevant to the ASEAN Social-Cultural Community. The ASEAN Ministerial Meeting manages another track on Social Welfare and Development, supported by the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children. The second track is to monitor the collaboration between ASEAN and the United Nations on protecting the human rights of women and children. In other words, the two tracks of institutional arrangement form the internal and external dimensions of ASEAN's gender policy.

Regarding the governance of gender issues in APEC, the theme of gender issues has not departed from the ECOTECH agenda that concentrates on women's empowerment and economic participation. Nevertheless, the priority of gender issues has witnessed two changes in the past years.

“ Gender equality is one of the key priorities to achieve the ASEAN Social-Cultural Community blueprint, along with other priorities such as promoting and protecting fundamental freedoms, human rights and social justice.

One change is the expanding scope and the cross-cutting nature of priorities. Initially, the priority of gender issues was limited to training programmes and business operations that were closed to women's economic participation. The priority described the Human Resource Development Working Group and the Small and Medium Enterprises Working Group as the two primary subforums to promote gender policy in APEC. Nevertheless, the two subforums were relatively inclined to take a gender-neutral position and focused on harmonizing domestic policies and training programmes across members.

The Ministerial Meeting held in 1998 improved the priority and gender-neutral attitude toward women. This meeting resulted from the changing position of APEC economic leaders in 1996, as mentioned before. The meaning of the Ministerial Meeting on Women is to discuss the policies from a gender perspective. In other words, gender issues are no longer attached to but central to other policies. By shifting the gender issues from the margin to the central to APEC issues, policies that might exist in gender inequality or create barriers to women's economic participation are all gender issues concerned by APEC economies and discussed in APEC. In addition, the gender-centred approach facilitated cross-forum collaboration and cooperation to pave the way for a comprehensive trade and gender nexus policy. This transformation was evident in the Statement issued during the 2004 APEC Ministerial Meeting,²⁷ where the significance of promoting women-specific programmes to enhance women's technical and digital skills, as well as establishing a strong connection between trade liberalization and gender equality, was emphasized. In the meantime, the Ministers Responsible for Trade also changed their gender-neutral attitude toward trade policy. In the 2005 joint statement, APEC Ministers Responsible for Trade acknowledged gender inequality existed in and was caused by international trade and stressed the importance of inserting gender concerns into trade policy.²⁸

The gender-centred attitude and approach shaped the cross-cutting nature of gender policy in APEC. Moreover, it paved the way for the second change – developing strategic plans for APEC and APEC members on gender issues.

The strategic plan for gender issues in APEC can be traced back to 1995. At that time, influenced by the United Nations policy of gender mainstreaming, APEC developed its first framework for integrating women into APEC by the 1998 Ministerial Meeting on Women. The framework indicated three priority areas for gender issues: gender analysis, the collection and use of sex-disaggregated data, and women's participation in APEC activities (True, 2008). Nevertheless, the framework primarily focused on promoting gender equality within the institutional structure of APEC and its associated activities rather than explicitly addressing the challenges and difficulties faced by women in individual member economies.

When APEC published the first edition of APEC Women and the Economy Dashboard in 2015, the discussion in APEC was more concerned with gender-sensitive policies among APEC members. That is because gender analysis and sex-disaggregated data enable economies to realize the real issues and problems affecting women's economic activities and to seek feasible solutions. In other words, the annual APEC Women and the Economy Dashboard facilitates data-based and evidence-based gender policymaking in regional governance. Based on the insights and outcomes of APEC initiatives and best practices, APEC endorsed an ambitious and comprehensive strategic plan for trade and gender nexus policy, such as the La Serena Roadmap for Women and Inclusive Growth (2019-2030).²⁹ The Roadmap guides

the priority areas for all APEC members and APEC forums in the following ten years. Given the whole-of-APEC, the whole-of-society and the whole-of-government approaches under the Roadmap, APEC members did not propose additional strategic plans for women's challenges during the pandemic and the recovery.

The two changes mentioned above prompted APEC to make adjustments to its institutional structure. During the gender-neutral stage, APEC did not establish any specific taskforce or working group dedicated to promoting gender issues. It was not until the inaugural special ministerial meeting on women in 1998 that APEC introduced an annual high-level meeting on gender issues, subsequently replaced by the High-Level Policy Dialogue on Women and the Economy and the Women and the Economy Forum. To facilitate the proceedings of high-level meetings, APEC introduced a new working group, overseen by the SCE, to oversee the implementation of gender policies and advance gender-related matters in the region. This working group, known as the PPWE, was established in 2011. However, unlike ASEAN, APEC predominantly focused on gender policies through a single track centred around the La Serena Roadmap for Women and Inclusive Growth.

It is noteworthy that the five priorities identified by the PPWE reflect the perspective that APEC's experiences provide a model for policies concerning the trade and gender nexus. These five priorities encompass the areas that present barriers to women's economic participation, including access to capital, access to markets, skills and capacity building, leadership and agency, and innovation and technology.

Implications of the regional experiences in the Asia Pacific in terms of trade and gender nexus policy

According to responses by individual economies and regional organizations in the Asia Pacific during the pandemic, they demonstrate different attitudes towards global and regional crises and diverse approaches to addressing gender issues. Mainly, regional organizations are crucial for mobilizing resources and support to fight the crises and lead cooperation and collective actions to maintain the stability of economic and social conditions. Therefore, a lesson learned from the pandemic is to refine the role of regional governance in international efforts and highlight the complementary relationship between regional and multilateral organizations.

More importantly, the Asia-Pacific experiences provide insights into two dimensions. One is about shaping policy responses to the global crisis; another is about facilitating international governance on trade and gender nexus policy.

“ These five priorities encompass the areas that present barriers to women's economic participation, including access to capital, access to markets, skills and capacity building, leadership and agency, and innovation and technology.

First, as to the policy responses to a worldwide crisis, the Asia-Pacific experiences indicate a dynamic development of policy response. Take the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance. At the beginning of the pandemic, policy measures taken by the government were gender neutral. These policies were more concerned with stabilizing the economic depression, surging unemployment and shortages of essential goods. However, as the economic and socially disordered situations progressively improved, the government shifted its focus and resources to specific groups in need or essential to fight the pandemic. That is why the government generally proposes gender-sensitive policies or supporting measures at a later stage.

An additional factor is that it requires time to collect and analyse data and information on the impacts caused by the pandemic on different groups. Therefore, the capacity and experience of collecting sex-disaggregated data from the government are crucial to the comprehensiveness of gender-sensitive policies being developed. Nevertheless, a government can learn lessons from others by relying on the regional information-sharing system because of the common characteristics of the economic and social challenges during the pandemic. This point explains why ASEAN and APEC committed to strengthening real-time information sharing in the region.

On the other side, responses by ASEAN and APEC during the pandemic demonstrate that a global and regional crisis affects the operation of a regional organization to a limited extent. While there is a time gap in response to the worldwide crisis between ASEAN and APEC, it is common for the two organizations to take two tracks to continue regional governance. One track is for the specific and emergent event; another is to continue the existing works and plans. Nevertheless, gender inequality during the global crisis indicates that the existing governance approaches remain dominant in regional organizations. Individual emergencies and crises hardly lead to changes in regional governance.

For international governance of trade and gender nexus policy, several insights are learned from the regional governance of ASEAN and APEC.

The first point is about the shifting paradigm of development concerns. In gender issues, governance has gradually departed from the traditional aid for trade policy based on the donor–recipient relationship. Undoubtedly, the gender issue in APEC is grounded in the context of ECOTECH, which was initially the mechanism supplementary to the trade agenda. The original rationale for the ECOTECH concerns the development gap between APEC members. However, with the growing power and capabilities of developing economies in the global market, the ECOTECH issue has emerged as a lever to reshape the trade agenda that was previously dominated by developed economies. In essence, the ECOTECH issue acts as a catalyst for establishing a more equitable economic relationship between developing and developed economies. Furthermore, the ECOTECH issue plays a crucial role in advancing regional economic integration by facilitating consensus-building on less contentious and softer issues. It becomes more significant when traditional trade matters, such as making specific commitments to eliminate tariff and non-tariff barriers, face challenges within the APEC framework.

In addition, the evolution of gender policy and gender mainstreaming in ASEAN and APEC implicates gender equality as a public good for regional cooperation. Specifically, ASEAN's experience implicates gender equality as part of the South-South economic cooperation.

Pasha (2022) concludes that the regionalism promoted under the ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN plus model marks a new pattern of regional economic integration. The pattern differs from the Western or European-centred experiences, which require binding and reciprocal benefits of trade agreements. Instead, the ASEAN model aims to pursue a relatively equal and fair relationship among the contracting parties. Therefore, the development need will be specifically concerned with trade negotiation. As a result, under the South–South cooperation, no one is the recipient or the donor to facilitate gender equality in the region. Instead, gender issues rely more on the spirit of burden-sharing and solidarity of all economies involved. In other words, gender equality is a public good that requires all economies to devote efforts at the national, regional and international levels.

Finally, this chapter emphasizes the significance of institutional arrangements in attaining effective gender policies. The experiences of ASEAN and APEC have affirmed that gender equality is a pervasive concern that spans various policy domains. It encompasses a broad spectrum of areas, including trade policy, industrial policy, labour policy and human resource development, as well as human rights and social welfare. While the priority and emphasis of gender issues vary in regional organizations, the implementation needs the support of institutional arrangements to reallocate resources. Nevertheless, the evolution of gender issues in ASEAN and APEC reveals that the adjustment of international arrangement could be a factor in initiating the change of gender policy or the result of the changes in gender policy.

Conclusion

Trade and gender were conceptualized as separate policy areas. It was also widely accepted that international trade and trade policy is gender neutral. However, the COVID-19 pandemic showed how disruptions in global trade caused severe challenges to women as workers and women-led businesses. Therefore, gender issues are vital to the sufficiency and effectiveness of policy measures responding to the pandemic and recovery. Nevertheless, while governments acknowledged that women suffered disproportionately during the pandemic, the policy decisions and responses to women's challenges vary in economies and regions.

By reviewing policy measures taken by economies and regional organizations in the Asia Pacific, this chapter argues the dynamic progress of forming the policies responding to the pandemic, from gender-neutral to gender-sensitive. How women's challenges were tackled during the pandemic can be seen as an integral component or extension of existing gender policies and protective measures. Furthermore, comparing the actions taken by ASEAN and APEC reveals diverse and dimensional gender issues. Significantly, the human rights-based and the ECOTECH-oriented approaches demonstrate possible governance patterns to

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address gender policy in the context of international trade and regional economic integration. The emphasis and significance placed on gender issues may vary, but the background and institutional structures of regional organizations play a pivotal role in shaping the governance of the trade and gender nexus.

When the WTO announced the Joint Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment in 2017, it marked a shifting paradigm in the international trade order and trade policy from gender-neutral to gender-sensitive. Furthermore, the Global Trade and Gender Arrangement initiated by three APEC members (i.e. Canada, Chile and New Zealand) in 2020 implicates the efforts to promote international governance of the trade and gender nexus. Therefore, the analysis of Asia-Pacific experiences in responding to the pandemic and promoting the linkage between trade and gender also contributes to the progress of gender concerns in international trade law.

We believe that the convergence and divergence of experiences within the Asia-Pacific region offer valuable insights into addressing various aspects of women's participation in trade and regional economic integration. Additionally, these experiences can enhance our understanding of the multifaceted and interconnected nature of gender issues, thereby expanding the scope of the trade and gender nexus policy within the multilateral mechanism. Of utmost importance is the acknowledgment of the synergistic relationship between regional and international governance, which could guarantee a harmonious equilibrium between global uniformity and regional distinctiveness in shaping the international framework for trade and gender.

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Endnotes

1. Chinese Taipei is a member of APEC. However, the database used in this chapter, the Global COVID-19 Gender Response Tracker, had incomplete information on Chinese Taipei. Therefore, to sustain the consistency of analysis, we did not include Chinese Taipei in the analytical scope of pandemic responses by Asia-Pacific economies.
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5. ASEAN Declaration on One ASEAN, One RESPONSE: ASEAN Responding to Disasters as One in the Region and Outside the Region, available at <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Declaration-on-One-ASEAN-One-Response.pdf>.
6. Chairman's Statement of the 37th ASEAN Summit Ha Noi, available at <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/43-Chairmans-Statement-of-37th-ASEAN-Summit-FINAL.pdf>.
7. See APEC Leaders' Declarations for 2020 and 2021, available at <https://www.apec.org/meeting-papers/listings/leaders-declarations>.
8. See APEC Leaders' Declaration for 2020, available at <https://www.apec.org/meeting-papers/listings/leaders-declarations>.
9. See the 2020 and 2021 APEC Women and the Economy Forum Statements, available at http://mddb.apec.org/Documents/2020/MM/HLPD-WE/20_hlpd-we_dec.pdf and https://www.apec.org/meeting-papers/sectoral-ministerial-meetings/women/2021_women.
10. 2020 APEC Women and the Economy Forum Statement, available at http://mddb.apec.org/Documents/2020/MM/HLPD-WE/20_hlpd-we_dec.pdf.
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12. The ASEAN Charter, Article 2(2).
13. The ASEAN Charter, Preamble.
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