IS ASEAN CARING ENOUGH?
MALAYSIA'S PROGRESS, AND THE PHILIPPINES' PATH FORWARD

Policy

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Women have long been regarded as the backbone of society, a phrase that conveys both resilience and burden. While this metaphor honours women's central role, it also exposes a longstanding contradiction; despite their contributions, women remain under-recognised in key decision-making spaces, particularly those dominated by men such as foreign policy circles and high-level ASEAN forums, leading to an under-representation of women and gender-related issues.Over the years, ASEAN has increasingly acknowledged these disparities. As the region marks its 47th Summit Meeting, ASEAN is better positioned than ever to advance gender-responsive institutional reforms. Against this backdrop, Malaysia's launch of the Care Strategic Framework represents a pivotal milestone that signals a shift toward embedding care, gender equality, and social protection into the region's developmental architecture, especially given its Chairmanship of ASEAN in 2025. However, there is always further room for development available, especially when the Philippines assumes the next Chairmanship in 2026, and what they are going to do to distinguish itself from Malaysia's achievements in 2025.

Historical and Cultural Context

Across Southeast Asia, care work is deeply embedded in cultural traditions shaped by intergenerational responsibility and filial piety (The Asia Foundation, 2023). However, these expectations frequently result in disproportionate care burdens on women, with direct implications for economic participation. In Malaysia, women consistently outperform men in tertiary education, yet this academic advantage does not translate into equal participation in the labour market. This is caused by the 'care burden', as a significant portion of women exit or reduce their involvement in paid work due to unpaid care responsibilities, limiting career progression and contributing to their under-representation in senior leadership positions (Khazanah Research Institute, 2025). These structural challenges underscore the importance of developing a care economy that supports both economic empowerment and gender equality.

ASEAN Policy Alignment

Officially, the care economy aligns with ASEAN's broader socio-cultural and developmental objectives. Within the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), care intersects with

gender equality, ageing populations, disaster preparedness, social protection, and digital transformation (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022). It is instrumental that ASEAN recognizes the importance of the care economy, as strengthening the care ecosystem is not only essential for advancing gender equality but also for expanding women's labour force participation and formalising a sector historically perceived as private or informal. By placing care within a regional development agenda, ASEAN lays the groundwork for long-term resilience, inclusive growth, and societal well-being for the citizens of the region.

Malaysia's Leadership in ASEAN

Under its 2025 ASEAN Chairmanship, Malaysia emerged as a regional leader in championing the care economy. The landmark conference, 'New Frontiers in the Care Economy,' held in November 2025, gathered policymakers, international experts, practitioners, and industry leaders (The Edge, 2025) to discuss, share, influence and shape the Care Economy not just locally, but regionally, and internationally. During this event, Malaysia launched its Care Strategic Framework and Action Plan 2026–2030, outlining multisectoral strategies to professionalise the care workforce, expand formal care services, and strengthen coordination across ministries. Evidence supporting these efforts is compelling: removing care constraints could enable more than 3.2 million Malaysian women to join the labour force, potentially unlocking an additional 4.9 percentage points in GDP (ISIS Malaysia, 2024). UNDP modelling further shows that investments in care could increase Malaysia's GDP by 6%, employment by 9%, and household income by 11% (UNDP, 2024). These findings highlight the care economy's transformative potential for national development.

Behind the development of a national framework lies the hard truth of Malaysia's demographic landscape that amplifies the urgency of strengthening the care sector. The country is on track to become an ageing nation, with the share of citizens aged 65 and at bove projected to rise from 8.1% in 2024 to 14.5% by 2040 (DOSM, 2024). The Fifth Malaysian Population and Family Survey (MPFS-5, 2025) reports that 70% of older Malaysians reside with their children or extended family, thus placing increasing pressure on households, particularly the 'sandwich generation' responsible for caring for both the parents, and children.

Currently, Malaysia's domestic care architecture is led by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (KPWKM), which oversees both social care policy and workforce development. Earlier in the year, the National Care Industry Roadmap was launched as the first step. To further prove Malaysia's national commitment, fiscal measures were introduced in 2024, under Budget 2025 that included tax relief for parental care expenses and RM3,000 relief for childcare and eldercare services (Ernst & Young, 2024). This further reinforces Malaysia's holistic approach to strengthening its care ecosystem.

The launch of such a framework and action plan positions Malaysia as a regional leader, nationally, in making national systematic developments and provides other ASEAN nations a guide on the pathway in developing their own national care economy governance structures, which have begun, but requires formalization that they can learn from Malaysia.
Beyond Malaysia, developments in the Philippines and Indonesia provide useful contrasts to assess the regional situation in the care economy's developments:

Developments in the Philippines

The Philippines offers a rich example of longstanding policy engagement in the care sector. Over the past three decades, the government has enacted multiple legislative and administrative measures to recognise and reduce women's unpaid care burdens, including provisions under the Magna Carta of Women (Stephenson et al., 2024). Although the country maintains public aged-care facilities and supportive care-related policies, cultural norms around familial caregiving remain deeply entrenched. More recently, the Filipino government integrated the care economy into its Women, Peace and Security agenda (Philippines Commission on Women, 2024), signalling its intention to develop a national care economy framework (Montemayor, 2025). These commitments build upon analytical work by organisations such as Oxfam (2024), which continue to highlight gaps and opportunities for systemic reform. However, the emphasis on producing awareness-raising documents indicates that the care economy in the Philippines is still in its nascent stages. This presents both an opportunity and a challenge, especially as the Philippines prepares to assume the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2026.

Developments in Indonesia

In Indonesia, the government has taken notable steps to expand childcare and eldercare services while strengthening social security coverage for older adults. In partnership with the International Labour Organization, Indonesia launched the Road Map for the Care Economy in 2024, and it has set to become one of the most comprehensive national frameworks in the region (ILO, 2024). Despite this progress, major challenges persist: formal recognition of care work remains extremely low at just 0.04%, and more than 36 million Indonesian women continue to work informally in care roles (World Bank, 2024). Addressing these gaps will require targeted reforms to promote formalisation, decent work standards, and equitable access to care services.

ASEAN's Strengthening Regional Architecture

At the regional level, ASEAN's broader care agenda began to take shape in 2021 with the adoption of the ASEAN Comprehensive Framework on Care Economy. This milestone formally linked care to gender equality, ageing, social protection, disaster preparedness, and regional resilience. Progress accelerated in 2024 when ASEAN endorsed the Declaration on Strengthening the Care Economy and Fostering Resilience toward the Post-2025 Community. The 3rd ASEAN Women Leaders' Summit in Vientiane, just last year, further positioned care as a cross-cutting regional priority, signalling ASEAN's commitment to embedding care within its long-term institutional architecture.

Looking ahead, the Philippines' ASEAN Chairmanship presents an opportunity to expand the conversation beyond national frameworks, as Malaysia did, towards a more coordinated regional approach to the care economy, particularly in the context of transnational labour migration. Across the region, care work similarly shapes migration patterns within ASEAN. For decades, millions of women from Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and other member states have migrated to support care and domestic work needs in wealthier economies within the region. The International Labour Organization identifies the care sector as a high-growth industry with the potential to generate substantial employment, improve household incomes, and stimulate broader economic development (ILO, 2024). Beyond economic impact, structured migration in the care sector positions ASEAN as a key influencer in regional labour governance, particularly in strengthening migrant worker protections, harmonising labour standards, and improving regulation of cross-border care services.

Furthermore, these dynamics show the need for a larger comprehensive, well-regulated regional care ecosystem capable of responding to demographic change and labor market demands, as well as developing protections beyond economic empowerment and into broader women's rights and well-being.

Malaysia's leadership in advancing the care economy reflects both national imperatives and regional opportunities. By aligning social protection, gender equality, economic productivity, and labour mobility, Malaysia has paved the way for ASEAN, and the Philippines to seize the opportunity to institutionalize care as a central driver of equitable and sustainable development not just nationally, but regionally. With the baton passed to the Philippines for ASEAN Chairmanship in 2026, regional momentum is expected to continue, paving the way for deeper cooperation and stronger regional care governance.

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