

Universal basic income could work in Southeast Asia—but only if it goes to women

July 11 2017, by Tamara Nair

The universal basic income debate has been raging for some years, with politicians and people hotly divided over the notion of their government paying every citizen a set amount of money on a regular basis, without requiring work to be completed.

The idea of everybody, including society's most marginalised, being able to afford their basic needs is [popular with mostly libertarian and progressive politicians](#), and there is some empirical evidence that it can quickly [increase a country's productivity and reduce domestic inequality](#).

Conservative economists, however, reject the idea, [citing its "impossibly expensive" nature](#).

Economic feasibility is a critical question for any government program, of course, and it is particularly relevant in the developing world, where universal basic income (UBI) has been suggested as a development tool.

One reason that Southeast Asian countries, for example, have [struggled to improve gender equality \(despite avowals of commitment to the idea\)](#) is increased economic insecurity, which has widened the gap between men and women and separated women from opportunities.

Might UBI be one way to both empower women and reduce hunger in the region?

Money in the hands of women

My research focuses specifically on women from the region who live below the poverty line, which, for East Asia and the Pacific, the World Bank defines as living on less than [US\\$3.20 a day](#).

In Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam – among the poorest Southeast Asian nations – between [13% and 47% of the population](#) is living in poverty. The number is significantly lower in better-off Brunei and Singapore.

On the whole, women in these countries fare well enough [compared to their peers in other developing regions](#) in terms of literacy, employment, political participation and the right to organise. But this has not translated into greater gender equality.

Here, [heteronormativity](#) reigns, dictating that men and women (and only men and women; all other gender identities are discounted) have distinct and complementary roles in life, from economics and education to politics.

Women are primarily seen as wives and mothers, a gender stereotype reinforced in both everyday experiences and [in the theological texts](#) of the main religions in the region.

That perspective also seems to dominate within [the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations](#) (ASEAN). Though women feature strongly in ASEAN's [socio-cultural community](#) line of work, there is very little debate about the role of women in the [economic](#) or [political](#) sphere.

By giving women the financial freedom to act as "agents" of development in the region, universal basic income could be a tool that ultimately paves the way for their future economic and political

involvement.

Women as agents of development

This process would start with something simple (and seemingly uncontroversial): women being able to put food on the table.

In poor families in Southeast Asia, up to [80% of household income](#) is spent on food, yet [undernutrition](#) remains a huge problem in Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines, Indonesia and, to a lesser extent, in Vietnam.

If women were provided with sufficient income to feed their families, it would translate into [better nutrition, health and general well-being for children and others entrusted in their care](#), and by extension, their communities.

Creating economic security for women is also key to a country's development. Southeast Asian women in poorer income brackets generally have access to very few jobs, outside of traditional occupations such as farming and housekeeping. And, today, even these jobs are threatened by climate change and a growing movement to [ban the export of foreign domestic workers](#).

Digitisation may lead to further unemployment among men, particularly in Southeast Asian manufacturing economies, exacerbating hunger and malnutrition.

There is evidence that giving women a specifically calibrated amount of money – regularly, and with no strings attached – could make a big difference in such settings.

After the NGO GiveDirectly first started its UBI program in a Kenyan village in 2016, it offered some residents US\$22 a month. The entire

community quickly saw positive effects, according to a February 2017 assessment of the program in the [New York Times](#). And residents hope that the experiment, which is scheduled to last for 12 years, will gradually lift them out of poverty.

UBI in Southeast Asia

Tacked onto the state's existing social safety nets, UBI can give much needed specific attention to women's broader economic empowerment, which is vital to a developing country's growth.

The first step toward doing so in Southeast Asia would be to identify women living below the [poverty line](#). Next, as in Kenya, each of these woman would be given [a sum of money in the form of electronic cash transfers](#).

Accessible through cheap mobile phones, this money can be used to purchase food and other basic necessities in participating shops, which may be incentivised to participate with credits or subsidies of their own.

To prevent abuse of a program intended to empower women and support families, the cash transfers must be either non-transferrable or transferrable only to another female family member, and only women will be able to spend the money (in approved shops).

Evidence from other countries suggests that, in some cases, men [waste](#) this "free pay" on alcohol, gambling and other non-essentials.

Programs must also be designed to be cognisant that, when women in traditional societies are [empowered](#), violence against them may increase, as men see women with money as a threat to their role in family and society.

Finally, women must be able to "graduate" from a UBI scheme. The idea is to empower participants, giving women a leg up to become active members of society – not to incapacitate them.

In the [Kenyan case](#), for example, many women (and men, too) used the allocated income to start small businesses. This opportunity could be developed as part of a potential UBI in Southeast Asia, considering both public- and private-sector partnerships.

If a universal basic income program really works, then [women](#) may even become contributors to programs in the future, and not just their beneficiaries.

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