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Beyond Tech-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Gender, and the Governance of Digital Economies in ASEAN

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The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee) is not typically associated with AI, sovereign wealth funds, or digital infrastructure investment. Yet across Southeast Asia, the CEDAW framework, particularly through the CEDAW Committee's recent concluding observations, is quietly becoming a normative force in the governance of digital economies.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), ratified by 189 States Parties, is often described as the international bill of rights for women. Its implementation is monitored by the CEDAW Committee, a body of 23 elected independent experts mandated under Article 17 of the Convention. Pursuant to Article 18, States Parties periodically report to the Committee on measures adopted to give effect to the Convention, generating a constructive dialogue process through which the Committee assesses compliance, elaborates the normative content of treaty obligations, and issues concluding observations interpreting State obligations under the Convention. Although concluding observations are not formally binding in the same manner as treaty text, they nonetheless carry significant interpretive and normative authority within the international human rights system. As outputs of the treaty monitoring process established under the Convention, they shape understandings of State compliance, influence domestic and regional policymaking, guide civil society advocacy, and contribute to the evolving interpretation of treaty obligations.

While much attention has focused on technology-facilitated gender-based violence, including in an initial position paper by the CEDAW Working Group on Gender-Based

Violence, this framing captures only part of the story. In its periodic review of Singapore, for example, the Committee calls for gender-responsive budgeting across all sectors of government, an intervention that directly shapes how digital infrastructure and innovation are financed. Comparable dynamics emerge across multiple ASEAN country reviews. Although similar patterns are visible in the Committee's engagement with states beyond the region, this article focuses on how the shift is unfolding across Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states, including Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. In these reviews, the Committee is doing something more ambitious: embedding gender equality norms into the governance of digital economies, innovation systems, and platform infrastructures.

CEDAW's constructive dialogue process functions as a site of authoritative norm elaboration for the governance of digital economies, articulating what gender equality requires of AI systems, digital supply chains, and platform governance, and introducing a rights-based logic that regional frameworks have so far failed to supply. The Committee operates not only by addressing online harms such as technology-facilitated sex trafficking, cybergrooming, online hate speech, the non-consensual dissemination of intimate images, but also by shaping the political economy of digital development in ASEAN member states through investment and market regulation, the architecture of AI and innovation systems, and the operational practices of platform governance. This evolution raises important questions about how far this role can and should be developed, and what a more deliberate version of it would look like.

Beyond Harm: Three Levels of CEDAW's Digital Governance Role

CEDAW's engagement with digital issues has traditionally been framed through technology-facilitated gender-based violence. This perspective remains central. Across each of the country reviews examined here, the Committee addresses technology-facilitated violence, from deepfakes, doxing and cyber-trafficking in Vietnam (paras. 24-25) to image-based sexual abuse in Singapore (para. 33b). But recent concluding observations reveal a broader and more structural shift in the Committee's focus.

The Committee is intervening across three distinct governance registers. At the macro level, it targets the political economy of digital development, including fiscal frameworks, supply chain regulation, and private sector accountability. At the meso level, it shapes innovation policy itself, addressing AI governance, STEM participation, and leadership pipelines in technology sectors. At the micro level, it demands changes in the operational practices of platform governance and law enforcement. These levels correspond to the stages at which gender inequality becomes embedded in digital systems, in the financial and regulatory choices that shape what gets built, in the innovation policies that determine who builds it, and in the enforcement practices that govern how these systems operate.

Together, these lenses reflect an understanding that digital technologies are not only sites of harm, but also systems that structure economic opportunity, governance, and power. Like other U.N. treaty bodies, the CEDAW Committee plays an authoritative interpretive role in elaborating the Convention as a living instrument responsive to contemporary forms of inequality. Addressing inequality therefore requires intervening not only in outcomes, but also in the markets, institutions, and design processes that produce them.

Market-Shaping: Gender Equality in Digital Investment and Economic Governance

One of the most significant developments is the Committee's move into economic governance and market regulation.

In its observations on Vietnam, the Committee explicitly links gender equality to business and supply chain regulation, highlighting gaps in due diligence obligations for private actors and calling for stronger accountability frameworks (paras. 8b and 9b). This is particularly notable given Vietnam's central role in global electronics and digital supply chains. The Committee also welcomes Vietnam's new state budget law, which requires gender mainstreaming in budget management and allocation (para. 4b), and calls for gender mainstreaming to be institutionalized across all ministries and government agencies (para. 17b).

Singapore provides an even clearer illustration of how CEDAW is engaging with the governance of advanced digital economies. The Committee calls for Singapore to integrate gender-responsive budgeting across all sectors of government, with effective monitoring and accountability mechanisms (para. 24). It goes further still in its economic and social benefits recommendations. It calls on Singapore to introduce gender bonds, which channel investment toward programmes advancing women's substantive equality in the economy, alongside affirmative procurement measures for public-private partnership projects and explicitly requires compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and business and human rights principles in areas including digital technology, AI, sovereign wealth funds, and the blue and green economies (para. 50c). In all of the ASEAN country reviews, this one most directly demonstrates CEDAW's reach into the financial and investment architectures of digital economies.

In the context of AI and digital infrastructure, effective monitoring and accountability could require states to assess not only who benefits from technological innovation, but also who bears its social, environmental, and labour costs. Such an approach would draw attention to women's concentration in precarious segments of global electronics and digital supply chains, the gendered consequences of the resource extraction underpinning digital technologies, and the environmental impacts of energy-intensive digital infrastructures.

In its constructive dialogue with the CEDAW Committee, Singapore has addressed platform governance and private sector accountability (paras 5, 70, 86, 87) while the Committee urges Singapore to strengthen regulatory frameworks, such as the country's Online Criminal Harms Act, and ensure that social media companies are held accountable for user-generated content, including through effective reporting and removal mechanisms (para. 34b).

In this CEDAW review, gender equality is no longer treated as a downstream social objective, but as a structuring principle of economic governance and digital regulation. In practice, this amounts to gender-responsive market shaping, potentially extending CEDAW's normative reach into fiscal policy, private sector conduct, and platform governance systems, and reframing gender equality from a social policy objective into a

criterion for how digital economies are financed and regulated.

Governing Innovation: AI, Representation, and Structural Inequality

The Committee's engagement with Thailand, meanwhile, illustrates its entry into AI governance and innovation systems.

In its 2025 concluding observations, the Committee calls on Thailand to ensure gender parity in decision-making systems, explicitly including emerging areas such as AI and frontier technologies (para. 12c). It also recommends that Thailand implement temporary special measures under its existing development frameworks, specifically the 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2023-2027), the National Artificial Intelligence Strategy and Action Plan (2022-2027), and the National Adaptation Plan for climate change, accompanied by penalties for non-compliance (para. 22). The Committee further recommends regulatory safeguards on AI to mitigate bias in algorithms and large language models in compliance with human rights standards (para. 24a). Taken together, these recommendations appear in the context of broader concerns about algorithmic bias amplifying discriminatory stereotypes, making them not simply procedural but substantive in their implications for how AI systems are designed.

This last recommendation matters for two reasons. First, it reframes digital inequality as a question of representation in system design, not merely who is harmed by AI but who builds and governs it. Second, it situates gender equality within innovation policy itself, including educational pipelines, workforce participation, and institutional leadership in frontier technology sectors. In Vietnam, the Committee similarly highlights the need to increase women's participation in STEM and information and communications technology, including artificial intelligence, and to make financial technology and information and communication technology (ICT) entrepreneurship accessible to women (paras. 33b and 39c). In Singapore, the Committee likewise addresses structural barriers deterring girls from STEM and Information and Communication Technology fields. It calls for policies to address the leaky pipeline phenomenon, where there are high women STEM graduates but does not translate into science and technology careers, and explicitly

includes emerging sustainable jobs, green engineering solutions, and green finance as areas where women's equal participation must be supported (paras. 42a and 42b).

Malaysia's 2024 concluding observations add a further dimension. The Committee flags the risk that AI-driven technologies will reproduce, amplify, and automate gender-based stereotypes, positioning AI not only as a governance challenge, but also as an active mechanism for norm reproduction and discrimination (para. 22f). It also welcomes Malaysia's Digital Education Policy 2023-2030, which promotes girls' and women's participation in STEM and digital skills, and uses it as a direct benchmark in its recommendations, calling on the state to expand access for disadvantaged women and girls to narrow the digital divide in line with it (paras. 5j and 37c). The concluding observations on Malaysia are the only review in the ASEAN group to anchor CEDAW's recommendations to a specific national digital education policy instrument, illustrating how the Committee's normative interventions can connect directly to existing state policy choices rather than operating purely at the level of principle.

These interventions move beyond reactive harm regulation toward an attempt to shape the structural conditions under which digital technologies are developed, deployed, and governed.

Platform Governance and Enforcement: The Philippines

At the operational level, the Committee's observations on the Philippines demonstrate how these norms translate into platform governance and enforcement practice.

The Committee welcomes the country's adoption of the Anti-Online Sexual Abuse or Exploitation of Children Act while emphasizing the need for effective implementation, interagency coordination, and robust survivor protection (paras. 4a and 30b). The Act establishes obligations for internet intermediaries, digital platforms, and relevant state agencies to detect, report, remove, and preserve evidence relating to online child sexual abuse and exploitation. Although framed through violence prevention, implementation of these obligations requires cooperation between states and technology companies,

deployment of digital detection tools, and the integration of human rights standards into the operational governance of online platforms.

States are increasingly expected by the CEDAW Committee to exercise due diligence not only within their territory, but also in relation to private actors operating transnational digital infrastructures. The Committee's Philippines observations extend this expectation into the governance of commercial platforms in ways that exceed traditional state-centric frameworks. That platform enforcement remains the least developed of the three registers examined here is itself significant: it points to where the structural limits of a state-centric treaty framework are most acutely felt, and where the Committee's future engagement will need to do the most work.

CEDAW and ASEAN: Rights-Based vs. Technocratic Governance

These developments unfold alongside regional initiatives, including the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics. While important, this and related frameworks remain largely principles-based rather than rights-based. When gender does appear in these frameworks, it surfaces as an example of algorithmic bias rather than as a structural concern requiring dedicated governance responses. These frameworks also emphasize trust, reliability, and economic growth without structuring those commitments around substantive equality or redistribution.

This gap is not unique to ASEAN's regional instruments. At the global level, the conclusions adopted in March 2023 during the sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW67) established an intergovernmental framework on gender equality, technological change, and digital education, calling for gender-responsive digital policies and women's equal participation in technology design and deployment. The Global Digital Compact, adopted at the Summit of the Future in September 2024 as part of the Pact for the Future, similarly commits to ensuring women and girls' full and equal participation in digital spaces and eliminating technology-facilitated gender-based violence. These are significant political commitments. But they share the same structural limitation as the ASEAN Guide: they operate through aspiration and voluntary

implementation rather than through accountability mechanisms that bind states to enforceable standards. Neither CSW67's agreed conclusions nor the Global Digital Compact creates the kind of interpretive baseline that can be invoked in domestic litigation, corporate due diligence frameworks, or treaty body follow-up procedures. That is precisely what CEDAW's constructive dialogue, operating through its accountability function, is beginning to supply.

That logic is substantive equality. CEDAW's recommendations call for redistribution of opportunity, restructuring of markets, and accountability for both state and non-state actors. This tension is particularly visible in the case of Singapore, where highly developed digital regulatory frameworks coexist with CEDAW's calls for stronger gender-responsive budgeting, private sector accountability, and platform regulation—areas that remain only partially addressed in regional ASEAN instruments.

Because the states examined here maintain differing constitutional and institutional relationships with international human rights law, norm circulation from CEDAW's constructive dialogue will necessarily take different forms across them. The Philippines follows the doctrine of incorporation under Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution, which expressly adopts generally accepted principles of international law as part of the law of the land. Singapore's engagement with CEDAW is mediated through reservations to key Convention provisions, which the Government justifies on grounds of religious pluralism, social cohesion, and labour migration policy (paras. 10 and 15). Malaysia's engagement with CEDAW has likewise been shaped by constitutional and Sharia-based frameworks, with ongoing efforts directed towards harmonising civil and Sharia law with Convention obligations (paras. 12 and 15). Lastly, Vietnam provides that international treaty provisions prevail over conflicting domestic legal documents, except the Constitution (para. 17). Yet the pattern of engagement remains sufficiently consistent across the five country reviews to suggest that CEDAW is articulating a common set of digital governance expectations, even where the pathways of domestic uptake differ.

ASEAN provides institutional infrastructure and political pathways, while CEDAW supplies rights-based content those pathways currently lack. Whether these frameworks develop closer points of articulation, or continue operating in parallel, is one of the central questions in the regional digital governance landscape.

Limits and the Mechanism Question

The Committee's emerging role is not without constraints, as concluding observations lack binding force. Because the Committee has no enforcement mechanism, in what sense is it shaping digital governance rather than merely commenting on it? The answer lies in authoritative norm elaboration. Concluding observations build interpretive precedents that circulate across legal and regulatory contexts and feed into domestic constitutional litigation, corporate due diligence frameworks, procurement standards, and the standard-setting work of other international institutions. The Committee's language on AI governance, supply chain accountability, and platform regulation does not directly bind Singapore or Vietnam, yet it articulates a gender equality baseline that civil society, legislators, and courts increasingly treat as authoritative. Critically, CEDAW's function as an accountability mechanism gives this norm generation its weight: states have reporting obligations, they respond, and the Committee interprets the Convention in light of those responses. This interpretive output contributes to an emerging normative expectation regarding gender equality in digital governance.

But a structural constraint remains. Regulating global technology companies remains structurally difficult within a state-centered treaty framework. As non-state actors, the platforms most relevant to digital governance are neither parties to CEDAW nor subject to its review mechanisms.

These limits clarify what a more developed version of this role would require. Closer coordination with other treaty bodies and with ASEAN's AI governance processes would multiply the points at which these norms take hold. More systematic engagement with platform companies as non-state actors, even within a state-centered framework, would extend the Committee's reach into the infrastructures that matter most. A thematic general recommendation on digital governance and gender equality would provide one avenue for consolidating the Committee's scattered interventions across country reviews into a coherent interpretive framework with the full normative authority of a general recommendation behind it.

Conclusion

CEDAW's recent practice signals an important shift in how international mechanisms engage with digital technologies. The patterns documented here focus on ASEAN, where the stakes are particularly acute: there is no regional human rights court, no binding regional human rights instrument, and no institutional mechanism for holding states accountable to gender equality norms in their digital governance choices. In this context, CEDAW's constructive dialogue is not simply one mechanism among many. It is, for many of the states examined here, the primary site at which these norms are produced and contested. What emerges across these country reviews is not merely a collection of technology-related recommendations but an increasingly coherent substantive equality framework for the governance of digital economies.

The three-level framework developed here—macro political economy, meso innovation policy, and micro platform enforcement—captures a governance role that is still emerging and remains uneven across contexts. The architecture of digital governance is being built now, and CEDAW is already part of that construction, introducing norms through its accountability function that are consistent with its founding purpose: the elimination of discrimination against women in every sphere of life, including the digital systems that increasingly govern it.

FEATURED IMAGE: Visualization of a digital city network (via Getty Images).