

Breaking Barriers

In working to address the gender gaps in Southeast Asia, SEAF has developed a framework based on the thesis that investments in high-growth firms in target sectors will improve the livelihoods and tackle economic empowerment challenges facing women as entrepreneurs, employees, and consumers in the Region.

SEAF has formulated a broad-based investment strategy through four pillars that create significant impact on women and their families. SEAF aims to provide capital to firms demonstrating high growth patterns and the potential for the implementation of women economic empowerment programs. These are firms with sizeable operations but still unable to access capital from financing institutions. Through its minority investments in these companies, SEAF will take on a role of an active, hands-on partner that can help them improve their operations and institutionalize gender equality improvement plans which will address pay equity, workforce participation, compensation and benefits, leadership and governance, workplace environment and value chains.

Women's Economic Empowerment Framework

SEAF's Women's Economic Empowerment Framework is built on the thesis that investments in high growth firms in the target categories will improve the livelihoods of the families of three intermediate beneficiary groups by tackling economic empowerment challenges facing women in Southeast Asia.

1. **Women Entrepreneurs and Executives** – Given the well-recognized financing gap for women-led businesses, Gender Lens Investing programs will serve those women entrepreneurs underserved by financial institutions, particularly those in need of equity or quasi-equity capital.
2. **Female employees** – Through a strategy of increasing gender equality within each investee in an intentional and measurable manner using the SEAF Gender Equality Scorecard©, female employees will benefit through improved pay equity, workforce participation, leadership and governance, benefits and professional development, workplace environment, and women-powered value chains. This will be particularly true for the second investment target category, which is sectors in which women are disproportionately prevalent.
3. **Female consumers** – By focusing, on companies that offer products and services that meet the unmet wants and needs of women and girls (as in the third investment target category), this broad, but underserved, consumer group will benefit from better access to products and services best suited to what they demand.

This thesis is strongly supported by the research-based Oxfam Women's Economic Empowerment Framework, which concludes that women will not achieve economic empowerment until the following are in place:

1. Women's ability to participate in and lead decision making and collective action,
2. Women's ability to maintain a job with a living wage, participate in or lead an enterprise, or retire with sufficient savings
3. The reduction and sharing of heavy care responsibilities,
4. Women's control over income, assets and natural resources in the household and vis-a-vis formal and traditional institutions,
5. Women's ability to live a life free from violence with confidence, mobility, security (no harassment), agency and organization to access markets,
6. Women's ability to build their resilience to external shocks, climate change and associated risks.

Creating an Equitable Ecosystem

Through the implementation of targeted investment and development programs, coupled with broader entrepreneurship ecosystem initiatives, ground-level efforts can contribute significantly towards enabling Women's Economic Empowerment and the closing of gender gaps. The results – women-led enterprises that provide employment opportunities along with goods and services sought by women and girls, creates not only immediate effects on economic development, but also builds a foundation that will enable continued growth through future generations. This is central to the work of SEAF and its partners, and is serious in need in SE Asia and beyond.