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25 Years of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: Sustaining Regional Momentum

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SYNOPSIS

Since the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda has become widely recognised as an integral part of international peace and security. However, new challenges to applicability and cooperation are emerging in an increasingly polarised world. States and regional organisations need to reexamine their WPS commitments to ensure they remain relevant and overcome present challenges.

COMMENTARY

This year, the world celebrates 25 years since the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in October 2000. Since then, the WPS Agenda has become embedded in international and national institutions of peace and security. Implementation has ranged from gender mainstreaming efforts in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations to the adoption and implementation of WPS action plans by both states and regional organisations. Yet, as we celebrate its 25th anniversary, the WPS Agenda is facing new challenges in sustaining its momentum across the world.

In ASEAN, only three out of 10 member states have localised the WPS Agenda through their national action plans (NAP), with the Philippines becoming the first ASEAN country to launch its NAP in 2009. Although ASEAN has since progressed with its own Regional Plan of Action on WPS (RPA WPS), adopted in 2022, a gap remains between regional acceptance and national implementation.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) launched its Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security (RPA WPS) on 5 December 2022. *Image from ASEAN Secretariat.*

What is the WPS Agenda?

The adoption of Resolution 1325 formally recognised the role of gender in peace and security at the UNSC. A watershed moment for the international community, this resolution reshaped traditional understandings of peace and security and launched the WPS Agenda. Specifically, it recognises the disproportionate impacts of conflict on women and emphasises the critical need to ensure their meaningful and equal role in peace processes and security institutions.

Based on Resolution 1325 and the subsequent nine resolutions that make up the WPS Agenda, four pillars have been identified as key focal points for action: (1) *protection* through safeguarding the rights of women in policies and institutions in the context of peace and security, including from gender-based violence; (2) *prevention* of all forms of violence towards women in times of peace and conflict; (3) *participation* of women at all levels of decision-making in institutions and organisations related to peace and security; and (4) *relief and recovery* through the advancement of and access to gender-specific relief and recovery support by women, both in times of peace and insecurity.

Once primarily linked to the UN system, as reflected in the Namibia Plan of Action, which played a part in the adoption and implementation on UNSC Resolution 1325, the WPS Agenda has since expanded. As of last May, 56 per cent of UN member states had adopted at least one NAP on WPS, including ASEAN member states Indonesia and the Philippines. Most recently, Vietnam launched its NAP in August 2024. Regional action plans also have been adopted by the Pacific Islands Forum and ASEAN, among other regional organisations.

Not only do these plans detail the practical actions, policies, and programmes that governments are implementing as part of their WPS obligations, they also provide a form of accountability to both international partners and civil society. Consequently, they invite a whole-of-society approach, increasing the likelihood of long-term sustainability.

Challenges

Progress in advancing the WPS Agenda is not linear, with emerging challenges threatening its continued momentum. While the WPS Agenda has been formally acknowledged at multilateral forums, with its high-level commitment reflected in plans of action, mechanisms, and other forms of implementation, progress is limited on the ground. Of the states that have adopted a WPS NAP, at least 30 per cent are outdated, with most of them having expired in 2022 or before.

The continued polarisation of the international community and a growing backlash against women's rights are having a chilling effect on the WPS Agenda. In countries around the world, women's rights are being rolled back, worsening gender disparities. This was clearly reflected in the processes leading up to the 2019 adoption of two follow-up resolutions, UNSC Resolutions 2467 and 2493. Negotiations became much more contested over the language of these resolution, some of which had been accepted in previous resolutions.

Another challenge faced by the WPS Agenda is the perceptions surrounding its applicability in non-conflict contexts, including disasters. Considering that the WPS Agenda emerged out of the UNSC — with its traditional security focus — and had primarily been applied to a conflict context, its buy-in was delayed in certain geographical regions with few conflict situations. With the UNSC limited in its ability to further develop the WPS Agenda in the face of internal divisions, regional organisations have taken up the call. They have paved the way for an expansion of the WPS Agenda, contextualising the agenda to best suit their respective regions.

The Pacific Islands Forum was the first region to use their PIF Regional Plan of Action for 2012–2015 to highlight the link between the WPS Agenda and the dangers of climate change and disasters. When ASEAN member states developed their RPA WPS, they too expanded the scope and understanding of "security" to reflect local realities, moving beyond conflict into the realm of human security and humanitarian crises beyond conflict scenarios. In regions where conflict is relatively limited and natural hazards are frequent, this interpretation of WPS has greater traction.

Sustaining the WPS Momentum in Southeast Asia

Emerging from several regional commitments over the years, such as the 2004 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in the ASEAN Region and the 2017 ASEAN Declaration on the Gender-Responsive Implementation of the ASEAN Community 2025, the WPS Agenda first gained official recognition in 2017 with the Joint Statement on Promoting Women, Peace and Security in ASEAN. This statement highlighted the importance of women's participation in security challenges and peace processes, as well as the need to address the root causes of conflict. The 2022 ASEAN RPA WPS then moved further in recognising the regional dynamics of peace and security in Southeast Asia, explicitly recognising the need for the document to "respond to both traditional and emerging security challenges" such as climate change, disasters, and pandemics.

However, beyond high-level regional commitments, there seems to be little national buy-in, as reflected in the relatively low number of ASEAN countries with NAPs. An

avenue for ASEAN to mainstream its WPS Agenda would be the already well-established area of cooperation — humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). Considering that militaries are the first responders in times of humanitarian crises in Southeast Asia, the ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) is emerging as an avenue to further develop the agenda. Consisting of the 10 ASEAN member states and their eight dialogue partners, the ADMM-Plus provides a platform for defence cooperation through various expert working groups, including one for HADR.

The ADMM-Plus Expert Working Group on HADR is an ideal platform for countries to work together to expand their knowledge base and establish gender policies. For example, with current co-chairs Singapore and New Zealand identifying WPS as one of their main agenda items over their term, this is a good opportunity to develop regional operational guidelines for gender mainstreaming during humanitarian emergencies. This could include the training and inclusion of gender focal points who advocate for an all-inclusive lens to be implemented when deployed on HADR operations, as is [being done in New Zealand](#). ASEAN member states could use the dialogue partner platform to learn from the New Zealand experience to initiate and adapt such policies for their own militaries.

Considering Southeast Asia's reputation as the most disaster-prone region in the world, the need for gender-sensitive policies is important. Developing gender-sensitive policies would further contribute to regional efforts to be a global leader in disaster management and would also be an important and tangible contribution to advancing the WPS Agenda on the 25th anniversary of UNSC Resolution 1325.

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