



A Plan for Inclusive Peace in Chaotic Times: ASEAN's Regional Framework for Women, Peace and Security

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By Tamara Nair

SYNOPSIS

Adopted in 2000, UN Security Council Resolution 1325: The Women, Peace and Security Agenda marked women's place in international peace and order. Some 22 years later, ASEAN adopts its Regional Plan of Action (RPA), which focuses on human-centred security and peacebuilding, thereby broadening the understanding of security. The RPA binds member states to an understanding of inclusive peace for the region and might just be what humanity needs in these chaotic times.

COMMENTARY

Women, Peace and Security – Provenanced in Conflict, Rooted in Human Security

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is the most significant and widely recognised global framework for gender-inclusive approaches to military affairs, conflict resolution, and security governance. The agenda has its beginnings in the armed conflicts of the 1990s, more specifically, in the disproportionate impact and suffering these wars brought upon the lives of women and girls.

The WPS marked an inflexion point in its recognition of the status of women in international peace and security issues and calls on member states to include and support women's participation in peace processes, and to protect them from violence during and after conflicts.

In addition, the WPS agenda shifts the focus of security from protecting states to include protecting individuals, which is needed considering how conflict not only

affects women and girls through direct violence but also through forced displacement, economic insecurity, and the breakdown of social support systems and social networks.

Twenty-five years later, the WPS agenda has expanded from its narrow inception to a broader framework, keeping pace with the times and the evolving security threats women face. The ASEAN WPS Regional Plan of Action (RPA) best captures this evolution.

ASEAN's Regional Plan of Action

The ASEAN WPS experience was decades in the making, and in recent years, there has been a significant commitment to advancing the agenda in the region. This has been particularly evident in the work of the sectoral bodies of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) and the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), as well as in the [ASEAN-UN Plan of Action \(2021-2025\)](#), and in work in both academic and policy circles.

Such sustained effort, including research and advocacy from earlier years, has led to recognition of the importance of a more inclusive approach to addressing both traditional and non-traditional security threats and cross-border governance challenges – in particular, the appreciation of the differentiated responses of women and men to violence and instability, as well as the acknowledgement of women's key role in peace and security efforts.

The ASEAN RPA exists alongside several WPS National Action Plans (NAPs): those of the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and, most recently, Malaysia. Although other states do not have specific NAPs, the RPA is a significant milestone, as its very existence is a consensus statement from all members.

The adoption of the RPA is noteworthy because it was drafted at a time when the region was not exactly "at peace": the region (and the world) was deep in the COVID-19 pandemic, disputes in the South China Sea were in full swing, there was a terrorist siege in Marawi in the Philippines and a military coup in Myanmar in 2021.

Despite these events, or perhaps because of them, the regional plan's objectives, indicators, and targets are wide-ranging and comprehensive. The plan covers traditional and human security concerns – from armed conflict and counterterrorism to climate change-related events, natural hazards, human trafficking and health emergencies, including women's mental health – a distressing lesson learned from the pandemic.

In troubled times, ASEAN member states under the RPA have a broader responsibility to adopt than is articulated in the original UNSCR 1325.

Forged in Chaos, A Path for Peace

With the lessons of past regional crises woven into its fabric, ASEAN's RPA can help identify and address not only gendered violence during armed conflict but also

gendered violence across all emergencies the region might face. That makes it a useful framework in these uncertain times.

Shifting from a focus solely on conflict-related gendered violence, ASEAN's regional plan maps out the prevention of violence against women, the protection of women from structural and physical violence, and the participation of women, including their role in relief and recovery. This is reflected in the deliberate effort to involve women in regional peacebuilding, as evidenced by the launch of the ASEAN Women for Peace Registry in 2018, which brought together representatives from all member states, government agencies, the armed forces, academia, and civil society.

The ASEAN WPS Regional Plan of Action is forward-looking. It is proof that the WPS agenda has "porous borders" that allow it to expand and include emerging threats that women might face. It addresses issues of "high security" – armed conflict, radicalisation, violent extremism and political violence in the region. At the same time, it allows for vernacular expressions of insecurity – that of health, gender-based violence, economic insecurity, digital access and digital violence, all of which will be heightened as effects of crises elsewhere reach our shores.

If recent disruptions have taught us anything, it is that not only the immediate effects touch us, but also the many "aftershocks" that devastate and destabilise human lives. Armed conflicts have reverberating effects, especially in our hyperconnected world. The ability to identify, assess, and prepare for potential critical disruptions will determine whether there is a temporary aggregate drop or an extremely disproportionate amount of suffering and fatalities for some. Unfortunately, such suffering is often borne by women. The WPS RPA reframes understandings of peace and security, and if translated into action, will help create a sustainable and peaceful region.

While the RPA will not always buffer hard times, focusing on its priority areas and targets can help identify and prepare for anticipated risks, including inputs from women. Helping women overcome crises leads to faster recovery and rebuilding, and inclusive growth, with benefits cascading from homes to communities to boost national stability and ultimately regional peace.

At a time when inclusive language and action are taking a backseat at the highest levels of governance, ASEAN's WPS Regional Plan of Action, which adopts a broad understanding of security, enjoys the consensus of all member states, and incorporates lessons from the many disruptions the region has faced, is *the* plan for inclusive peace in the present and the foreseeable future.

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