



The WPS Agenda and Mutual Aid: Transforming Regional Aspirations to Local Commitments

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By Tamara Nair and Junli Lim

SYNOPSIS

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and “mutual aid” are two distinct but interlinked frameworks that prioritise grassroots humanitarian action and peacebuilding. Their integrated operationalisation is crucial for crisis response and recovery. ASEAN’s WPS regional plan is the optimal vehicle for igniting and driving regional aspirations through local commitments, aligning with recent shifts towards localisation in the international aid architecture.

COMMENTARY

Recent aid cuts by leading donors, including the United States, France and Germany, together with calls from the United Nations for a “humanitarian reset” underscore the need for localised, community-led approaches to crises and emergencies. The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and “mutual aid” are two distinct yet interlinked frameworks that prioritise bottom-up strategies when protection gaps exist.

The WPS agenda is a formal, institutional framework focused on protecting women from violence, preventing violence against them, and ensuring their sustained participation in peace processes and in relief and recovery after crises. Mutual aid, on the other hand, is grassroots, voluntary action towards collective community care and solidarity, often involving the exchange of vital resources. Together, they mark a shift away from traditional, top-down responsibility and strategies towards greater community adaptability and gender equality.

Both are needed to forestall turbulent, unpredictable times in the current political milieu. ASEAN’s regional WPS plan offers a pathway forward.

“Mutual Aid” is Survival Work

Conceptualised by Peter Kropotkin, a Russian theorist of anarcho-communism, in the early 20th century, mutual aid means voluntary cooperation among individuals to meet shared needs. It operates on the principle that cooperation, especially during crises, rather than competition, underpins human evolution.

Crises and disasters arise when natural or human-induced hazards cause serious disruptions to the functioning of a community or society, overwhelming capacities to respond and cope, resulting in serious harm, damage and loss. The state’s ability to respond effectively to an emergent situation will determine whether a humanitarian crisis ensues.

In these pivotal moments, particularly in sudden-onset situations, first responders are almost always individuals or groups already at or near the site of the crisis. Mutual aid groups often form in this context, especially among women who take whatever action is necessary to support their families’ survival.

Women possess vast social capital, both collectively and individually, and are crucial to crisis response, assembling critical resources to support their families and communities. Persistent relegation of women to unofficial spaces often forces them to form strong informal social networks to efficiently procure food, fuel, and makeshift shelters when disasters strike.

This adaptability needs to be strengthened by directing necessary resources their way. The critical role that women play is evident in the Myanmar military’s [recent ban](#) on sanitary towel distribution, which commentators claim is an attempt to restrict women’s movement in social and political activities.

Any efforts to bolster a community’s ability to weather crises should aim to activate local women and women’s groups as key stakeholders in adaptation and reconstruction strategies. This becomes even more important as cuts to humanitarian funding have created space for genuinely localised action, while international agencies lose their ability and access to operate locally.

Yet the phenomenon of mutual aid and the vital role of women in relief action on the ground have largely been ignored in both policy and in regional scholarly work on crises and humanitarian studies. Such a lack of attention is even more concerning when one considers the increasing human-induced risks, such as climate change and armed conflicts, as well as other resulting and intersecting human security risks, that Southeast Asia may face.

ASEAN’s regional plan on WPS provides a framework for incorporating mutual aid by centring elements of local, women-led community action.

The Intersection of Mutual Aid and the WPS Agenda

Mutual aid in the context of the WPS agenda refers to grassroots, community-driven support networks in which women provide essential aid, security, and

humanitarian services, particularly during conflict and crisis, often filling gaps left by formal institutions. Such “white spaces” are revealed when adaptation and recovery strategies fail to recognise the importance of women in the community or perpetuate the antiquated practice of linking women and children in policy-speak, therefore failing to recognise the unique needs, strengths, and vulnerabilities of distinct groups.

Cultural institutions such as *gotong royong* in Indonesia and Malaysia, *bayanihan* in the Philippines, and *parahita* in Myanmar are identifiers of nation and community and exemplify mutual aid practices that empower women to play critical roles in crisis response. Such institutions also resist the portrayal of women as passive victims by transforming the housewife, grandmother, sister or daughter into a first responder and a resilient and resourceful member of her community, challenging gender stereotypes.

ASEAN’s WPS regional plan focuses on these women’s resourcefulness and ability to become active partners in building a stable and peaceful region. It broadens the WPS agenda, as established through the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, by expanding the definition and understanding of security to focus on human-centred security and peacebuilding. Women are seen as active agents who lead and hold communities together during crises and disruptions.

Several priority action areas in the regional plan call for integrating women’s groups into disaster planning, relief and recovery strategies, and early warning systems. From the prevention of domestic violence to targeted online attacks, women’s informal groups and networks form important support systems to address gendered violence and human insecurities experienced by women and girls. The formal recognition of these age-old women’s (mutual aid) networks and their role in protecting and sustaining communities is one more step towards realising the goals set out in ASEAN’s WPS commitments.

From Regional Aspirations to Local Commitments

To move from commitment to implementation, ASEAN will need to operationalise its WPS plan not only through regional security mechanisms but also through existing cultural institutions. Mutual aid provides this opening through grassroots, women-driven support networks that provide essential aid, security, and humanitarian services, particularly during times of crisis.

Integrating mutual aid into ASEAN’s regional plan will strengthen communities and ensure that the WPS agenda responds to the real conditions of insecurity faced by women and girls in Southeast Asia today. Furthermore, it advances the meaningful inclusion of women in peacebuilding efforts, as envisioned in the WPS agenda.

While the WPS regional plan aims to build a people-centred peaceful region, mutual aid supports this objective by employing a “peace from below” or grassroots peacebuilding strategy focused on human security – built by local communities and women’s networks that translate regional aspirations into local commitments. This

becomes critical, especially at present, when peace and stability are anything but a given.

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