

# Strengthening the WPS Agenda: Women and Minority Groups

Southeast Asian Women Peacebuilders Network





# Introduction

**T**he Southeast Asian Women Peacebuilders Network (SEAWP) made its debut with a regional summit in May 2020. A platform for women in civil society organisations around the region, acting as activists, negotiators, lawyers and peacebuilders, the network was created to showcase the work these peacebuilding experts and practitioners do, as well as forwarding the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.

SEAWP's first seven months beginning May 2020 has been impressive: its webinars have reached a wide set of audience and the speakers have been a good mix of well-known experts and lesser known ones, with a breadth of experiences among them. These webinars have also featured young women working within the security and conflict areas as researchers and other significant roles.

In September 2020, SEAWP began its second series of webinars and come to the realisation that it has been challenging during these unprecedented times. In embracing the new normal, the increasing number of webinars have taken over the lives of many, and people, including peacebuilding experts, are either too busy or have over committed themselves to other panels, hence the limited number of webinars as was originally planned. The second series of activities was supported by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Japan.

The regional webinar in February 2021 saw the actors in Women, Peace and Security discussing the next steps for Southeast Asia, aligned with the following criteria:

- The Joint Statement on Women, Peace and Security in ASEAN adopted at the 31st ASEAN Summit in Manila in November 2017, recognizes that peace and security are essential to the achievement of sustainable development and are interconnected and vital to the future of ASEAN, emphasizing women's equal, full, and effective participation at all stages of peace processes given their indispensable roles in the prevention and resolution of conflict, peacebuilding and peacekeeping.
- Recognising the CEDAW GR 30's agenda on the importance of conflict prevention for women's rights notwithstanding, conflict prevention efforts often exclude women's experiences as not relevant for predicting conflict, and women's participation in conflict prevention is low. The Committee has previously noted the low participation of women in institutions working on preventive diplomacy and on global issues such as military expenditure and nuclear disarmament. In addition to falling short of the Convention, such gender-blind conflict prevention measures cannot adequately predict and prevent conflict. It is only by including female stakeholders and using a gendered analysis of conflict that States parties can design appropriate responses.
- That women's participation in the peace process is crucial: addressing Gender Based Violence (GBV) in a conflict setting, recognizing the leadership of, and supporting women's organizations at the grass-root level.

SEAWP aims to be a leading regional network and collective of women peacebuilders in Southeast Asia.

**Today, you can find SEAWP at the following channels:**

**Website:** [www.seawomenpeacebuilders.com](http://www.seawomenpeacebuilders.com)

**Instagram:** <https://www.instagram.com/seawomenpeacebuilders/>

**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/seawomenpeacebuilders>

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# Executive Summary

**T**his policy paper will highlight women's engagement in implementing the Women, Peace and Security agenda through the different roles of women participation. The report is composed of findings and discussions output from the webinar series and conference on Women Inclusion and Leadership in Peacebuilding by the Southeast Asian Women Peacebuilders Network (SEAWPN), and its constituent organisations, which include IMAN Research; Aman Indonesia; and Walailak University, Thailand, among others, in partnership with the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. The paper will address Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) in the ASEAN region, and within the ASEAN member states, and what roles women contribute towards realising the WPS agenda.

## Summary of Research Findings

1. The UN Women, Peace, and Security plan was the first recognition of women's peacebuilding participation. The UNSCR 1325 is aimed at promoting women's participation in the peacebuilding process, and emphasises their equal importance in the maintenance and promotion of peace alongside their male counterparts.
2. UNSCR 1325's WPS implementation is still considered weak as women's peace processes are still rarely addressed within these peace agreements. UNSCR has had little impact in terms of facilitating female participation in peace processes

3. Although women's involvement in Southeast Asia remains limited, there are several success stories from the Philippines. Women's participation at the parliamentary level has brought new dynamics in the peace processes. In addition, CSOs have played a role in shaping women participation in peacebuilding in Aceh, Indonesia.
4. The increase of women participation in Track One negotiations will not only enhance conflict-resolution approaches, but also enable women to participate in policy-making, and advocate for a more gender-inclusive government.
5. The current structure to peace mediation is too patriarchal and rigid, thus raising the question of whether there might be other alternatives to multi-track diplomacy and mediation, that can better accommodate gender inclusivity, such as a feminist approach to mediation.
6. A feminist approach to mediation acknowledges the different professions and skills that each individual has brought from their experiences, and seeks ways to combine each expertise to complement one another, and generate even greater power.
7. The CSOs assist the community by empowering specific sectors of society, and they act as a bridge between the government and the public. They are the voice of the minority, ethnic, and vulnerable groups as well as grassroots communities.
8. The CSOs' wide range of expertise and practices makes them a valuable resource, especially in data gathering and monitoring the implementation of peace processes.
9. Transforming the structure of society requires cooperation from all gender and sectors of society. Women cannot change the system of society in isolation.
10. Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) and women activists are crucial players in protecting women, and advocating women issues in society. They are key actors in pushing for more meaningful roles for women in peacebuilding.

## Webinar recommendations

1. Provide programmes that can support women to participate in peacebuilding discussions while they fulfil their familial responsibilities.
2. Empower women at the regional level in both Track One and Track Two negotiations, to optimise their abilities and knowledge in order to aid discussions at the peace table.
3. Large international CSOs have the responsibility to promote and support grassroots and local level CSOs to become more meaningful change agents.



4. Develop capacity-building for women activists and WHRDs by internalising preventive measures, and carefully implementing policies.
5. Consistent and sustained lobbying at Track Two level of negotiation is integral to ensuring female participation in Track One level negotiation.

## Background of the Policy Paper

The UN Women, Peace, and Security agenda, created twenty-one years ago, became the first platform to recognise women's participation in peacebuilding. However, only a limited number of women occupy key positions in policy-making and peacebuilding. It is hoped that in the coming years, there will be more women from different stakeholder groups interacting and collaborating to promote peace in the region, with more women occupying key leadership positions.

The UNSCR 1325 is fundamentally built around four pillars: prevention, participation; protection; and peacebuilding and recovery. The Resolution, aimed at promoting women's participation in the peacebuilding process -- and their equal importance in the maintenance and promotion of peace alongside their male counterparts -- became the first instance in which the UNSCR recognised women's role in armed conflicts' resolution, outside of being considered victims of violence.

However, the implementation of UNSCR 1325 remains weak. A 2015 UN Women's survey showed that the UNSCR had little impact in facilitating female participation in peace processes, with less than half of the major peace agreements signed making any reference towards women.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, 60 percent of all peace processes between 1989-2019 had identifiable informal peace processes, although only 71 had apparent female involvement.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, a quantitative study that looked at whether a possible gender perspective had been adopted in the peace agreements signed between 1999-2010 (after the signing of UNSCR 1325) concluded that women's role in peace processes is still rarely addressed in these peace agreements.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, women peacebuilders continue to support the different peace processes taking place in various Southeast Asian countries.

In Southern Thailand, where there have been more than 7,000 deaths, on many sides, since hostilities began in 2004, Muslim rebels continue their anti-colonial campaign against the

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1 UN Women. 2015. Preventing Conflict Transforming Justice Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. [https://wps.unwomen.org/pdf/en/GlobalStudy\\_EN\\_Web.pdf](https://wps.unwomen.org/pdf/en/GlobalStudy_EN_Web.pdf)

2 Amina Rasul-Bernando. 2021. We Still Don't See Enough Women in Peace Processes in Southeast Asia. Peace Process in Southeast Asia: Is There Enough Involvement from Women?, 19 February 2021.

3 Ibid.

Buddhist Thai government that annexed the region in the early 20th century.<sup>4</sup> Despite being excluded from official peace negotiations such as the 2015 Thai-MARA Patani Peace Dialogue, women continue to aid the informal peace efforts.

On the other hand, women in Myanmar are still mainly marginalised despite having a female head of state. According to the UN, women and girls in Myanmar are in a state of ‘silent emergency’ wherein fundamental human rights are still constantly violated.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, little to no change has taken place in terms of patriarchal societal norms, and legislative bodies have yet to pass specific laws against domestic abuse. The UN even went so far as to declare in June 2020 that sexual abuse and gender-based violence are ‘hallmarks’ of the Myanmar military’s cleansing operations against the Rohingya. Many in Myanmar initially had hoped to see greater female involvement in the official Rohingya peace processes, which began under Thein Sein in 2011, following Suu Kyi taking power, but they were summarily disappointed. Yet, women in Myanmar have continued to rally peacefully for Suu Kyi’s release, and against the recent coup in Myanmar.

Despite the obstacles and lack of formal participation and entry point to participate in the peace processes, women still play critical roles in advocating peace and justice in the region. Female-led peace processes are distinct from male-led peace processes; where male-led peace processes focus on the sharing of spoils, female-led peace processes place more emphasis on reconciliation, economic development, education, and transitional justice; all of which comprise elements necessary in creating a long-lasting, sustainable peace.<sup>6</sup> In Southeast Asia, women are still largely excluded from official peace processes in conflict areas, despite the expertise and advantages women have brought thus far to informal peace efforts. These expertise and benefits include local conflict resolution, advocacy for equality, among others. Also, female involvement can help generate support for the formal peace process, while simultaneously lending a sense of legitimacy to the peace process, and creating the necessary and effective back channels required in peace negotiations.

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4 Amina Rasul-Bernando. 2021. We Still Don’t See Enough Women in Peace Processes in Southeast Asia. Peace Process in Southeast Asia: Is There Enough Involvement from Women?, 19 February 2021; Aljazeera. 2019. ‘Muslims in South Thailand Mark 15 Years Since ‘Tak Bai Massacre’. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/25/muslims-in-south-thailand-mark-15-years-since-tak-bai-massacre>

5 The Global. 2016. A Silent Emergency: Violence Against Women and Girls. 25 November 2016, [www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/myanmar/news-2016/25\\_Nov\\_16\\_gnlm.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/myanmar/news-2016/25_Nov_16_gnlm.pdf)

6 Amina Rasul-Bernando. 2021. We Still Don’t See Enough Women in Peace Processes in Southeast Asia. Peace Process in Southeast Asia: Is There Enough Involvement from Women?, 19 February 2021.



# Findings and Discussions

## Women in government

### Parliamentarians

Aside from the UNSCR 1325, regionally, ASEAN has established the ASEAN women for peace registry in 2018. This document highlights the importance of women's inclusion in formal peace processes, and the roles women play as mediators. Women's successful involvement in the legal peace process is evident from the Philippines' negotiation process, with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Women successfully achieved 40 percent of the peace negotiations.<sup>7</sup> Despite women's progress and success in peace negotiations, there is still a wide gap in gender inclusivity within the leadership and representatives of governments in Southeast Asia. Although the ASEAN WPS Agenda acknowledges the importance of women in formal decision-making processes and security mechanisms in practice, only several countries have formally included women as part of the process. Most women's peace talks' roles have remained informal, and are mainly categorised as Track Two peace processes.

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7 ASEAN. 2021. ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security. 2-4.

The Philippines' case features stories where women's involvement at the parliamentary level brought new dynamics into the peace processes. The Philippines' official peace process began in 1993, with the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, through the signing of Executive Order No. 125 of 1993.<sup>8</sup> The underlying principles of the Office, and the more extensive peace process included: a community-based approach reflecting sentiments, values and principles essential to all Filipinos; the forging of a new social compact to establish a just, equitable, humane and pluralistic society, where all individuals and groups are free to engage in peaceful competition for the predominance of their political programs without fear, through the exercise of rights; and a moral and peaceful resolution to the internal armed conflicts, with neither blame nor surrender, but with dignity for all concerned.

Since its establishment, there have been three female Presidential Peace Advisers and Negotiators: Annabel Abaya (2009-2011); Teresita Quintos-Deles (2003-2005, 2010-2016); and Miriam Coronel-Ferrer (as Chair of the Government of the Republic of the Philippines Panel to the peace negotiations, 2010-2016). There have also been other women involved in the official peace process, such as Alma Evangelista (Executive Director of the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process under Peace Adviser Manuel Yan); Diosita Andot (Executive Director, 2016-2018); Gloria Jumamil-Mercado (Executive Director, 2018-2019); and Irene Santiago (Chair of the Negotiating Panel).

To add to this already impressive track record of involving women in official peace processes, the Philippines also became the first country in Southeast Asia to create a National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security (NAP WPS, 2017-2022). The pillars of the National Action Plan included: promotion and mainstreaming; empowerment and participation; protection and prevention; and monitoring and evaluation. Initially, the National Action Plan was implemented aggressively by relevant parties, with even local government units incorporating elements of the NAPWPS. Unfortunately, the Plan's implementation has since stagnated with no proper monitoring framework to assess the Plan's effects.

These women have worked hard to ensure greater female participation in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao's Government (BARMM). As a result, women had reserved seats in the Bangsamoro Parliament, with one seat reserved for a youth community member, and one seat reserved for religious leaders. Furthermore, 13/80 members of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority are women, 4/27 members of the BARMM Cabinet are women, and 26/116 mayors of BARMM are women.<sup>9</sup> Female role models in peacebuilding are significant. The case, as mentioned above, has shown the importance of female role models in the area of conflict; women whom have had direct experience of the conflict

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<sup>8</sup> Executive Order No. 125 of 1993, "Defining Policy and Administrative Structure for Government's Comprehensive Peace Efforts", <https://peace.gov.ph/opapp/executive-order-no-125-s-1993/>

<sup>9</sup> Miriam Coronel-Ferrer. 2021. Women Too Often Omitted from Peace Processes: Lessons Learnt from the Philippines Women Inclusion in Peacebuilding: A Framework for Continued Sustainability, 19 February 2021.

but have risen above their origins. The increase of women's participation in Track One will enhance conflict-resolution approaches, and enable women to participate in policy-making, and advocate for a more gender-inclusive government.

## **Mediators**

Historically, mediation has always been a male-led effort. In the post-World War Two era, the first UN mediators were white males from the West who flew to the ends of the Earth, far from their countries of origin; and despite their limited familiarity with the local situation. Since then, the mediation process has essentially maintained its linearity and structure, where everyone gathers around a table and discusses the issue, and later comes to an agreement followed with celebratory functions. However, during the implementation, sometimes the approach would work, and sometimes it would fall through.

Later in the 1980s, there was a shift in conference-based mediation towards multi-track diplomacy mediation efforts. Discussions between top-level leaders happened in conjunction with CSOs that were often allowed or invited to participate. This new mediation structure is still very patriarchal, and carries on certain aspects of the 'big men flying in, gathering in groups, and forcing negotiations' which is the standard mediation structure of the Post-WWII era. This mediation effort was more focused on discussing the problem, and not collaborating with others to find solutions. The process is systematically designed to omit women from discussions, because in the past women have struggled to participate in Track Three negotiations. They may be involved in Track Two now, but they still face challenges in Track One.

Therefore, the mediation practice's patriarchal character and rigid structure have raised whether there might be other alternatives to multi-track diplomacy and mediation to better accommodate gender inclusivity. The lack of women's involvement drove several female activists and peacebuilders to explore the idea of a feminist approach to mediation, and whether there is a possibility to instil a more feminist approach to mediation.

The following are findings by women peacebuilders and experts on what a feminist approach to mediation would be when implemented in the field.

Shadia Marhaban, who previously worked on the conflict in Cameroon, and the conflict in Sudan, believes mediation is about profoundly listening, and analysing pain triggers. Emphasising on the emotion of war is equally vital in peace processes as political arrangements. Therefore, it is crucial for armed groups to be involved in peace talks, and for all relevant stakeholders to listen to their concerns, their 'triggers of pain,' and the emotions associated with the conflict. For example, it was posited that the Myanmar

military firing on protesters was a result of their sense of humiliation following their failures in the 2020 General Elections, apart from trying to lead people who no longer want to be ruled by them. Of course, the military has their economic and power interests, but what has driven them towards committing atrocities is that the loss of their sense of dignity and respect from the people.

Meredith Preston McGhie of the Global Centre for Pluralism, who worked in African conflicts, explored a feminist approach to mediation. She began to question why peace processes have been highly linear, and why they do not involve every relevant stakeholder. She believes that instead of thinking about how women can join the negotiation table, women should try to think of other approaches and models that are workable. “Why try so hard to be at the centre of the discussion if women can still contribute from the outside?” she asked. And this approach applied not only to policy-making, but also in connecting with the people in conflict. Hence, her model of a feminist approach to mediation is not about having a single table that includes all relevant stakeholders, but about having multiple tables of discussion that can bring people together into one.

Meanwhile, Neha Sanghrajka, a Senior Adviser to the Peace Process in UN Mozambique, has advocated not for a top-down approach, but rather a circular course that emphasises collaboration in creating a community that focuses on problem-solving processes. She argued that “it takes a village,” and even more, to implement something as emotional as a peace process. Christine Ahn of the “Women Cross DMZ” also believed that peace can be attained faster by focusing on the community’s peace processes. Using the example of the war between South Korea and North Korea, Christine posited that if there had been more involvement between the people and the community, the war might have ended. This argument is based on the fact that negotiations and peace processes have only been limited to political leaders. Thus, the people, social movements, and civil society need to organise and demand that their political leaders realise peace.

This approach highlighted the importance of civil societies and their role in holding political leadership to account. Ameya Kilara of the “South Asian Leadership Initiative Intermediate” argued that by looking at political challenges we are trying to mediate between competing interests, identities, and narratives. Thus, mediating political challenges or political conflicts require peacebuilders to focus on the power dynamics and economic interests, and focus on the story that is being told. It is therefore crucial to consider how different versions of truth and history can be brought into one future, and the different ways to navigate these competing interests into one.

Julia Roig of “Partners Global” emphasised the importance of resources and their role in peace processes. Julia highlighted how shared resources are part of the peace process, and



how the resources are used, or not used. Julia also emphasised that in peace processes, what is most important is coordinating a collective message while undertaking the peace processes. According to her, women are more willing to cooperate and promote one another to join the negotiation table. The idea is to combine all the efforts to go in the same direction, and to complement one another. It is believed that the hyper-focus on ‘getting a piece’ is ultimately borne out of selfishness and is a patriarchal trait. Meanwhile, the feminist approach focuses on a collective process that merges individuals from various sectors into solidarity.

Creating peace is possible, but it requires persistence and collaboration. Women are powerful agents of change because they persevere through hard times and never give up. Women believe that the more power and the more resources are shared, then the more energy and the more resources there are for all. The core of the feminist model of peacebuilding is the belief in power-sharing, not monopolising power. The patriarchal mediation model focuses on one person holding power, dominating it and controlling the space to their liking.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the feminist approach acknowledges the different professions and unique skills that each stakeholder possesses in various societies. It seeks ways to combine each expertise to complement one another, and generate even greater power.

In Southeast Asia, the Indonesian government recently initiated a Southeast Asian Network women peacebuilders mediation (SEANWPNM). Inspired by the global alliance of regional women mediator networks launched on the 74th session of the UNGA in 2019, the Indonesian foreign affairs ministry established SEANWPNM for representation in the ASEAN community.<sup>11</sup> It is hoped that this network can complement and reinforce the existing WPS mechanisms and initiatives in ASEAN, and establish cooperation with similar mediation networks in other regions such as those in Scandinavia, the Mediterranean, Africa, and the Commonwealth. The primary aim is to increase the reach and visibility of women mediators in SEA.

The mediation network and other forms of networks are essential in forming linkages with like-minded people from different countries or regions. Such networks are critical to inspiring one another to share experiences and provide support among women. All of which can become a source of empowerment.

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10 Dr Emma Leslie. 2021. The Myanmar Peace Process: A Reflection on Women’s Role. Peace Process in Southeast Asia: Is There Enough Involvement from Women?, 19 February 2021.

11 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia. 2020. Indonesia Initiates the Establishment of the Southeast Asian Network of Women Peace Negotiators and Mediators (SEANWPNM) to Advance the Agenda of Women, Peace and Security in the Region, <https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/2019/berita/indonesia-initiates-the-establishment-of-the-southeast-asian-network-of-women-peace-negotiators-and-mediators-seanwpmn-to-advance-the-agenda-of-women-peace-and-security-in-the-region>

## Women Civil Society Organization

Civil society is a critical force in the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. They are key actors in advocating WPS issues through their own unique and innovative ways of implementing the WPS agenda. Women-led groups have the experience and capability to support diverse and marginalised communities. They have worked with the National Human Rights Commission, consulted with local governments to implement social safeguards, and improve access to social services. Women groups have also frequently facilitated interfaith dialogue between Buddhist and Muslim communities. At the regional level in Southeast Asia, the roles of CSOs have already been acknowledged by governments, as evidenced by the adoption of WPS at the ASEAN regional forum, where nation-states gathered and made a joint statement to work together towards making progress on the WPS agenda. Such recognition entails increasing meaningful participation of women CSOs, and women networks in implementing the WPS agenda, as well as in the prevention, management, and resolution of armed conflicts, and post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation.

Women-led groups are capable of many achievements such as the formation of women's peace network known as the Peace Agenda of Women (PAOW). Composed of more than 20 women-led groups, PAOW promotes women's increased role in peacebuilding and peace negotiations.<sup>12</sup> In Thailand, the network helped to establish the Southern Border Provinces Administration's Coordination Center for Children and Women. By advocating for human security and creating safe spaces, PAOW and other Women CSOs in Thailand have managed to enhance national and physical security, in terms of improving safety and creating safe spaces. The women created a safe space for the community for their everyday socio-economic interactions, where people can also voice their needs, fears, and concerns, and also be free from discrimination and indignity.

Although CSOs have begun to gain more acknowledgment for their roles, in practice, they have had limited space to interact with ASEAN institutions, except for the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN People's Forum (ACSC/APF) held annually in parallel with the ASEAN Summit. Other noteworthy conferences include: the Regional Consultation on Human Rights held alongside the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) or the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) meetings, and several conferences held by commissions and working groups such as AICHR, ACWC, and the ASEAN Committee on the Implementation of the ASEAN Declaration on the Rights of Migrant Workers (ACMW).

Nevertheless, the curbs on freedom of speech, and freedom of opinion, have led to the

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12 Dr Suphatmet Yunyasit. 2021. Peace Process Architecture in Thailand: Creating a Safe Space for Women. Peace Process in Southeast Asia: Is There Enough Involvement from Women?, 19 February 2021



phenomenon known as ‘the shrinking space’. Thus, many NGOs and CSOs are currently experiencing ‘bureaucratic crushing,’ where many NGOs and CSOs face highly demanding bureaucratic requirements merely to exist.<sup>13</sup> In addition, CSOs must also adhere to the rules of procedure and criteria, or engagement for entities associated with ASEAN set out in 2016, by the committee of permanent representatives to ASEAN. Overall, ASEAN accredited CSOs performing functions and programmes that are governmental or quasi-governmental, but are not incorporated formally into the ASEAN structure. In practice, different bodies and agencies of ASEAN such as the AICHR, ACWC and ACMW have adopted their engagement methods for CSOs.

Despite the challenges, several ASEAN members states (AMS), including Myanmar and the Philippines, have strong subnational experience with CSOs contributing to gender-inclusive livelihood promotion in conflict areas. For example, in the Philippines, CSOs have played a vital role in empowering their community, as seen from the CSOs’ role in establishing their network in the Muslim community.<sup>14</sup> This initiative is in collaboration with the Philippines Commission for Human Rights. In Myanmar, CSOs were permanently excluded from formal peace processes and negotiations, and only the government, military (the Tatmadaw), Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), and political parties, are recognised as parties in the political dialogue. However, CSOs were crucial for the final push towards a democratic transition, with CSOs functioning as representatives of various interests in society.

CSOs have also played a key role as first responders providing humanitarian relief in crises such as the 2008 Cyclone Nargis.<sup>15</sup> Inadequate government response and problematic institutions make CSOs role in society even more important. However, their efforts to support those affected by the cyclone were not free from the military government’s repression. Despite the CSOs successful and active role in society, the ongoing military coup and the military’s patriarchy that is often abusive towards women and girls, means that the future fate of CSOs in Myanmar, particularly women CSOs, is uncertain.

Meanwhile, in Aceh, Indonesia, a local women organisation, “Flower Aceh,” was initiated to challenge public discourse on the “referendum” into the alternative of “peace,” thereby shifting public opinion. Women voiced “peace” instead of “referendum” during the “Acehnese Women Congress,” hosted by women activists, and victims and survivors of sexual gender-based violence (SGBV)<sup>16</sup>. Under the context of an ongoing armed conflict, the congress provided a safe space for around 500 women who came from different sub-

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13 Cate Buchanan. 2021. Women Inclusion in Peacebuilding: Reflections and Its Future. Women Inclusion in Peacebuilding: A Framework for Continued Sustainability, 19 February 2021.

14 Amina Rasul-Bernardo. 2021. We Still Don’t See Enough Women in Peace Processes in Southeast Asia. Peace Process in Southeast Asia: Is There Enough Involvement from Women?, 19 February 2021.

15 ASEAN. 2021. ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security. p63-64

16 Suraya Kamaruzzaman. 2021. Institutionalisation of Women’s Voices and Reconfiguring the Politics of Peace – Aceh. Community-Driven Peace Processes and the Role of Women, 19 February 2021.

districts.<sup>17</sup> However, when the peace agreement took place in Helsinki in 2005, none of these women participated at the negotiation table. Under the new, more prominent coalition-building, “*Balai Syura*” took the initiative to monitor Helsinki’s implementation together with other CSOs.

Those examples from the Philippines, Myanmar and Indonesia have shown that CSOs do not only assist the community by empowering specific sectors of societies, but they act as a bridge between the government and the public. They are the voice of the minority, ethnic and vulnerable groups, and grassroots communities, that are not provided platforms to share their knowledge and ideas. Their function in society is to deliver these marginalised groups, and grassroots communities to the national level. The example of Thailand showed that in realising security and creating a safe space, there needs to be a focus on promoting dialogue (which include positional dialogues, human-relations dialogues, problem-solving dialogues, and activist dialogues). These also cover capacity-building initiatives, lobbying campaigns, individually or collectively, with other female-oriented organisations such as PAOW, Civic Women, Hearty Support Group, and others.

Connecting these women groups with relevant stakeholders will enable them to conduct further discussions and share experiences creating a proper safe space. The vital role that women-led groups play in this example underscores how women are an integral part of peacebuilders and decision-makers. Thus, the empowerment of women-led groups, women activists, and WHRDs are essential. However, women cannot transform the structure of society in isolation. Women need to cooperate with their male counterparts, and change these men’s security perspective by highlighting women’s works in informal spaces.<sup>18</sup> Women in Track One have the duty to create an actual structure and framework for women’s sustainable and continual involvement in peacebuilding, and to ensure policies do materialise into practice.

## Women in the field

Aside from women’s involvement in the institutional and organisational levels, there are also individual women at the societal level, such as Women Human Right Defenders (WHRDs) and women activists. They are critical players in providing protection for women and advocating women issues in society. However, in their works, WHRDs and activists encounter many criticisms, and face many risks that threaten and even criminalise their jobs. With the increasingly consolidated political and economic interests of officials, as well as of corporations, more and more law enforcement officers have become partial, and

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Dr Suphatmet Yunyasit. 2021. Peace Process Architecture in Thailand: Creating a Safe Space for Women. Peace Process in Southeast Asia: Is There Enough Involvement from Women?, 19 February 2021

do not necessarily practice the principles set out in the UN Declaration. Consequently, WHRDs and women activists are at an even greater risk, because some of their critics abuse regulations, and even fabricate cases to criminalise these WHRDs and activists.

Other groups of women whose voices have tended to be side-lined are female ex-combatants. The discussion with Arifah from Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, gave an interesting insight into how former female combatants in the Aceh conflict have tried to reintegrate with the community. The voices of female ex-combatants need to be heard because they have the potential to become peacebuilders. Unfortunately, this discourse is not strong enough, because the focus on post-conflict peace building inclines only towards target male combatants. This is in accordance with the latest report from Berghof Foundation Operations (2020)<sup>19</sup> which one author is Salawati, an activist from *Liga Inong Aceh* (LINA) who trained over 300 female ex-combatants in two years. The report also narrated the stories from female ex-combatants in conflicts in Mindanao, Nepal and Burundi.

Moreover, the patriarchal tendencies within Southeast Asian countries have led to increasing militarism, misogyny, and repressive culture, and religious narratives. Additionally, the passing of new regulations, drafted to limit activists and WHRDs, has led to an increase in the number of perpetrators of violence against WHRDs, with strong impunity, especially if they are strong, powerful, and wealthy. Although some protection mechanisms for WHRDs exist in Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia (for example, the Indonesian National Commission of Human Rights), these mechanisms are often poorly implemented, slow to react, or do not have the resources to protect WHRDs adequately. Furthermore, there are simply no SEA laws that ensure the protection or the security of activists or WHRDs. Many individuals or organisations working to maintain women's rights or other groups have mostly been accused of criminal acts instead. Others have been charged by security forces, more often than not, for 'attacking' members of the security force or the larger government.<sup>20</sup>

In Vietnam, many HRDs have been detained for abusing their 'democratic rights. In the Philippines, HRDs working on environmental issues, agricultural issues, and land issues have been charged with attacking security forces. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, deep-rooted patriarchal values have limited the space for WHRDs to carry out their work, with the ITE Law often used to criminalise Indonesian WHRDs. In Myanmar, the Law on Sufficient Procession, Article 19 of the Peace Council, has allowed the government to silence many WHRDS. In contrast, in Cambodia, demonstrations continue against the detainment of WHRDs within the country.

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19 The report contains stories from five demobilised armed groups in Aceh (Indonesia), Mindanao (Philippines), Nepal, and Burundi, that played an active part in the research and documentation process. Forty-three women shared their stories with the researchers. (see more "I Have to Speak" – Voices of Female Ex-Combatants from Aceh, Burundi, Mindanao and Nepal. Edited by Evelyn Pauls with Tripani Baijali, Alabai Buisan Mikunug, Gypsy Queen Buisan Sumampao, Grace Nitunga, Lila Sharma, and Salawati S.Pd. Berlin: Berghof Foundation. 2020

20 Damairia Pakpahan. 2021. 'We Are Not Criminals': Stories of Women Human Rights Defenders in Southeast Asia. Peace Process in Southeast Asia: Is There Enough Involvement from Women?, 19 February 2021.

Between 2019-2020, there were a total of 49 (known) WHRDS criminalisation cases in Southeast Asia.<sup>21</sup> Vietnam arrested six WHRDs in 2019, and five WHRDs in 2020. The Philippines arrested five WHRDs in 2019, and eight WHRDs in 2020. Indonesia arrested seven WHRDs in 2019, and four WHRDs in 2020, whereas Thailand arrested one WHRD in 2019, and five WHRDs in 2020.

To counter this worrying trend, WHRDs must develop capacity-building measures to protect themselves and the organisations they work for, with preventive measures internalised, and policies carefully implemented. Also, WHRDs must continue to advocate for their rights in their respective countries, and advocate for the rights of their fellow WHRDs elsewhere. Utilising international and regional mechanisms such as the UPR, the AICHR, and the ACWC can help in this endeavour.<sup>22</sup> However, limitations exist within these mechanisms, such as AICHR ToR has no mention of the term ‘WHRDs,’ and the ‘ASEAN Way unavoidably limits ASEAN mechanisms.’

To fulfil UNSCR 1325, WHRDs must continue to push for more meaningful roles for women in peacebuilding and not consent to tokenistic offerings. Women’s participation in peacebuilding must be significant. However, we should not ignore women at the community level, nor should we overlook the community as a whole.

Two-pronged strategic approaches are needed to create a more comprehensive, bottom-up movement, and a genuine change movement. Thus, women cannot only lobby for specific policies, but they must be willing to protest, and demand that their presence be acknowledged and accepted, nor can they sit idly by and wait for change to come.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



# Policy

## Recommendations

**F**rom the findings and discussions of the SEAWPN webinar series and conference, the participants recommended several approaches to enhance women's role in peacebuilding and negotiation processes.

Firstly, to provide more edge for women to participate and to be considered critical stakeholders in discussions, women should become subject specialists, especially within non-traditional security issues. This will leverage women and enable them to operate at the strategic level, and utilise their roles to shift men's perspective at the table regarding women's contribution to peacebuilding.

Moreover, one of the primary obstacles to women's participation is their familial responsibilities. With women's increasingly limited resources, and being under-funded members of the minority and feminist organisations and movements, women need to be savvier in their approach, and to be more innovative in supporting female peacebuilders to fulfil familial responsibilities. The conference's panellist suggested that international donors, and organisations, as well as state institutions, provide more programmes to accommodate these needs. An example given was the Rapid Response Fund by USAID in Myanmar, which helps to cover certain costs of travel, and childcare, among others, to enable the participation of women whom are invited to attend, or act as speakers at specific key meetings.

Aside from increasing women's participation in Track One peace negotiations, it is equally important to focus on women's peacebuilding in Track Two. Track Two is essential for women peacebuilders as it provides the flexibility of space and resources that women can use to advocate their cause. The freedom provided in Track Two allows women to manoeuvre and interact with all sorts of different actors. Thus, beyond national-level peace processes, we need to find ways to empower women at the regional level to make the most of their abilities and knowledge to aid those at the peace table. The larger international CSOs are responsible for helping those at the grassroots and local level, and those without resources, to enable them to become more meaningful change agents.

Moreover, women's groups or organisations, especially at the individual levels such as WHRDs and activist, should focus on developing their capacity building to protect themselves through internalised preventive measures, and carefully implemented policies. They should utilise regional and international mechanisms to advocate for their rights by continuously pushing for more meaningful involvement of women in peacebuilding processes.

Lastly, consistent and sustained lobbying at the Track Two level of negotiations is integral to ensuring female participation in Track One negotiations and peacebuilding efforts in general. Both formal and informal approaches are vital in promoting greater female participation in peace processes. Furthermore, civil society can and should work together with the government, other CSOs, and community organisations to promote a collective message.



# Conclusion

In conclusion, women's participation is not merely about the number of women involved, but it's also about the substance and the essence of which women are encouraged to participate in meaningful discussions. Although it has been more than two decades since acknowledging women's role in peace processes through the passing of UNSCR 1325, women remain underrepresented in mediation and negotiation processes. In the most recent ongoing peace talks, it was evident that only 10 percent of women negotiators were involved in the Afghan peace talks, 20 percent in Libya's political discussions, and almost none in Yemen's current ongoing peace processes.

The development of women's participation in the Philippines has shown how the involvement of women has produced better solutions. Having women in leadership can also increase women's involvement in other sectors, thus creating a more inclusive problem-solving process. Women's role in mediation can provide a dynamic discussion and create a more holistic solution that includes all society members.

CSOs most effectively contribute to peace processes at the community level through a multi-pronged approach, wherein alternative narratives to peace are promoted, and the different actors involved in the peace process and reconciliation efforts, and the survivors of gender-based violence are recognised for the role they have played. It has been acknowledged that CSOs are essential in documenting the history of injustices, highlighting victims of gender-based violence during conflicts, and exploring new ways to continue peacebuilding efforts. All these efforts are highly critical to furthering Track Two peace negotiations. CSO can be valuable resources, especially in data gathering and monitoring the implementation of peace processes.

However, the institutionalisation of women CSOs in peace processes remains lacking. Therefore, coalition-building and various stakeholders' involvement are vital to influence the public discourse on the matter. These practices can also be essential in integrating specific gender narratives within Track Two frameworks.

Women are always perceived as victims of conflict, but this is because they are not included in the conversation. As evidenced from the role of women in Track Two, or even in Track Three in Thailand, women are key actors and stakeholders in conflicts. The initiatives taken by women show their capacity and abilities to contribute. However, the patriarchal structure of the peace process that intentionally excludes women, and the cultural challenges that impede women's contributions, make for a significant loss for the whole community as they have missed out on women's unique and valuable insights.







Steering Committee SEAWP

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