

## Military Humanitarianism in Southeast Asia: Through a Women, Peace and Security Lens

By **S. Nanthini**



Photo Credit: U.S. Indo-Pacific Command / Flickr.com via Creative Commons

### Abstract

In reaction to the rapidly increasing and intensifying natural hazards that have emerged as a result of climate change, militaries are becoming more prominent in the humanitarian space due to their functional capabilities. However, considering the links between an increase in security personnel and the heightened vulnerability of women to sexual and gender-based violence, there is also a need to look beyond the functional advantages of the military during disaster responses by integrating a gendered perspective – specifically through the use of the WPS agenda – to shed light on the specific risks of women and girls in disaster contexts. By analysing the central role of the military in the Southeast Asian humanitarian architecture through the four pillars of the WPS agenda, this paper looks to deliver insights into the potential impacts of the increasing military presence in humanitarian response elsewhere.

### Contents

Introduction

The Women, Peace and Security  
Agenda in Southeast Asia

ASEAN's Humanitarian  
Infrastructure through the Lens of  
the Women, Peace and Security  
Agenda

Moving Forward...

Recommended citation: S. Nanthini, Military Humanitarianism in Southeast Asia: Through a Women, Peace and Security Lens, No. IN24-04 (Singapore: RSIS Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre), Nanyang Technological University Singapore. 2024).

## Introduction

The military's presence in humanitarian response operations is not a new phenomenon, with the modern version of the practice dating back to post-WWII Europe.<sup>1</sup> However, what is different is the increasing practice of calling upon militaries to respond to disasters in domestic settings, rather than only as part of overseas humanitarian missions in post-disaster situations. According to Military Responses to Climate Hazards tracker by the Centre for Climate and Security, there has been over 280 disasters to which there has been a military deployment – the vast majority of them being domestic disasters.<sup>2</sup> This seems to be driven – at least in part – by the growing frequency and intensity of disasters as a result of climate change where it is becoming increasingly common for states to have their civilian disaster response capacities overwhelmed and needing to call upon their militaries. Militaries are therefore increasingly seen as an integral contributor to disaster responses – both as support for humanitarian operations for overseas disasters as well as in domestic disaster emergencies. The case for military involvement during domestic emergencies was also strengthened by the experience of COVID-19 with states around the world – even where militaries are generally not called upon during domestic disaster operations - mobilising their militaries to enforce curfews and movement control orders, construct makeshift hospitals, and provide transportation and logistics support as part of their national response.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, while militaries may be a useful actor in functional terms, there are also risks to an increased military presence – in particular, to women.<sup>4</sup> Considering the well-established link between an increase in security personnel and the heightened vulnerability of women to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), an increased military presence in a humanitarian environment where women are already disproportionately impacted, may have unpredictable consequences. As such, there is a need to look beyond the functional use of the military during disaster responses by integrating a gendered perspective to shed light on the specific risks of women and girls, and addressing their particular needs women in such humanitarian contexts – as highlighted by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, also known as the Women Peace and Security Agenda.

As *the* most disaster-prone region in the world, Southeast Asia is no stranger to military involvement in disaster response, with the region's militaries long having been considered the primary first responder during situations of humanitarian emergencies.<sup>5</sup> As such, this region would be an interesting case study through which to view a situation where the military play a central role in humanitarian response operations as a matter of course, as well as the role *of* – and effects *on* – women within such humanitarian architecture. In particular, this insight will analyse the role of the military in the humanitarian space using the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) lens in Southeast Asia. The next section will introduce the WPS Agenda and the role of the military in the humanitarian infrastructure in Southeast Asia. Subsequent sections will then explore and analyse this humanitarian infrastructure through the four pillars of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) framework/context.

---

<sup>1</sup> Killian McCormack, and Emily Gilbert, "The geopolitics of militarism and humanitarianism," *Progress in Human Geography* 46, no. 1 (2022):179-197, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325211032267>

<sup>2</sup> "Military Responses to Climate Hazards (MiRCH) Tracker", Council on Strategic Risks, accessed 1 May 2023, <https://councilonstrategicrisks.org/ccs/mirch/>

<sup>3</sup> S. Nanthini, "Public Health Emergencies: Moving Beyond Ad Hoc Military Responses", *IDSS Paper*, March 2, 2023, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip23019-public-health-emergencies-moving-beyond-ad-hoc-military-responses/>

<sup>4</sup> United Nations, *Conflict Related Sexual Violence: Report of the United Nations Secretary-General*, 2019, <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/report/s-2019-280/Annual-report-2018.pdf> ; Marjan Malešič, "The impact of military engagement in disaster management on civil–military relations", *Current Sociology* 63, no. 7 (2015): 980–998, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392115577839>

<sup>5</sup> Angelo Paolo L. Trias and Alistair D.B. Cook , "Military humanitarian and disaster governance networks in Southeast Asia: framework and analysis", *Disasters* 47, no. 1 (2023): 205–241, <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12542>; Deon V. Canyon, Benjamin J. Ryan and Frederick M. Burkle Jr, "Rationale for Military Involvement in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief", *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* 35, no.1 (2019): 92–97, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049023X19005168>

# The Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Southeast Asia

## What is the Women, Peace and Security Agenda?

Broadly the WPS Agenda was launched with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325). Emerging from previous commitments including the *1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* and the *1995 Beijing Declaration* as well as an increased awareness of the particular risks faced by women in conflict-affected contexts as a result of the UN peacekeeping missions of the 1990s, this resolution recognises the disproportionate effects of conflict on women, and recognise the critical role they can and do play in peacebuilding.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the UNSCR 1325 calls for members of the United Nations to work to increase the participation of women in local and international processes for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict, integration of gender perspectives in all peacekeeping processes and operations, as well as develop and implement effective institutional arrangements to protect them from SGBV as a result of conflict.<sup>7</sup> This, together with the nine other related UNSCRs, they make up the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.<sup>8</sup> Achievements over the years include the increase of the inclusion of women/gender references to almost 30 percent of all resolutions in 2015 from 15.8 percent in 2010 and the creation of National Action Plans (NAPs) to develop and implement the WPS Agenda in a national context.<sup>9</sup> Drawing on these resolutions, four pillars have been identified – (1) protection; (2) prevention; (3) participation and; (4) relief and recovery – as the key focal points for global efforts on recognising and dealing with the specific challenges that women face in armed conflict.

As a result of the UNCHR 1325, the Southeast Asian countries – through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) too implemented its own Regional Plan of Action in 2022. 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 and Sustainable Development Goals*, the WPS Agenda first gained official recognition in the region in 2017 with the *Joint Statement on Promoting Women, Peace and Security in ASEAN*.<sup>10</sup> This then led to the creation of related initiatives and mechanisms such as the ASEAN Women for Peace Registry under the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation in 2018 and as mentioned, the *ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on WPS*, which was further “reaffirm[ed]” by the recent ASEAN WPS Summit in 2023.<sup>11</sup> Part of the objective of the Regional Plan of Action is to not only deliver clear guidance for the implementation of the WPS regionally, but also for the national and local context.<sup>12</sup> Importantly, it explicitly and firmly expands the scope and understanding of ‘security’ to move beyond conflict into the realm of human security, in turn, highlighting its application during humanitarian disasters including natural hazards.<sup>13</sup> In Southeast Asia, where conflict is relatively limited and natural hazards are frequent, this interpretation of WPS with its emphasis on natural hazards therefore has greater applicability. As part of this expansion of scope however, there is therefore also a need to take into account the central role of the military in Southeast Asia’s humanitarian architecture in Southeast Asia.

---

<sup>6</sup> “Resolution 1325 (2000)”, United Nations, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n00/720/18/pdf/n0072018.pdf?token=YqsfZIQ79MWbnHKXr9&fe=true>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid; Chantal de Jonge Oudraat and Michael E. Brown, “Gender and Security: Framing the Agenda,” in *The Gender and Security Agenda.: Strategies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. C.J Oudraat and M.E Brown, (Routledge, 2020), 1 – 27.

<sup>8</sup> UNSCR 1325 (2000), 1820 (2008), 1888 (2008), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013), 2242 (2015), 2467 (2019), and 2493 (2019).

<sup>9</sup> “WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AND THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL”, UNWomen, accessed 1 May 2023, <https://wps.unwomen.org/security-council/>

<sup>10</sup> ASEAN, *ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security*, (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2022), [https://wps.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/FINAL\\_ASEAN-Regional-Plan-of-Action-on-Women-Peace-and-Security\\_reduced-1.pdf](https://wps.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/FINAL_ASEAN-Regional-Plan-of-Action-on-Women-Peace-and-Security_reduced-1.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> WPS ASEAN, “ASEAN Member States and Partners Reaffirm Commitments to Implement the Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security at High-Level Dialogue Hosted by Indonesia”, *WPS ASEAN*, June 7, 2023, <https://wps.asean.org/news/asean-member-states-and-partners-reaffirm-commitments-to-implement-the-regional-plan-of-action-on-women-peace-and-security-at-high-level-dialogue-hosted-by-indonesia/> .

<sup>12</sup> ASEAN, *ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on WPS*

<sup>13</sup> S. Nanthini and Tamara Nair, “COVID-19 and the Impacts on Women”, *NTS Insight*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/nts/covid-19-and-the-impacts-on-women/>

## The Role of the Military in Southeast Asia’s Humanitarian Architecture

In Southeast Asia, militaries play a significant role in disaster management, with the region’s militaries considered a primary first responder during situations of humanitarian emergencies.<sup>14</sup> In the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response – the region’s foundational document for disaster management and cooperation in the region – the military is clearly highlighted as one of the primary actors in disaster management, with explicit recognition of the utilisation of military assets including “personnel, experts, equipment, facilities and materials...” under Articles 8, 9, 11, 12 and 15.<sup>15</sup> However, their role in the humanitarian architecture of the region extends far beyond their first responder status. The presence of the militaries also be felt in the civilian sectors. with the national disaster management organisations of several countries headed, or having been headed by former – and active – military officials.<sup>16</sup>

This deeply embedded nature of the military within the regional humanitarian architecture seems to be based – in large part – on its functionality. In other words, considering the practical advantages the military brings to the table in terms of their expertise in logistics, transport, communication and specialised equipment, coupled with their ability to mobilise quickly.<sup>17</sup> This also has the added benefit of potentially occupying the military in a time of relative peace.

However, beyond the practicalities that may guide regional states’ reliance on militaries to fulfil their disaster response needs, there is a need to also look at the human and social dimensions of this militarisation of the region’s humanitarian sector on women and girls – particularly, as the region seeks to include a more nuanced and gendered perspective while further developing its regional architecture through the mainstreaming of the WPS Agenda. How women in Southeast Asia are affected by and themselves affect the humanitarian space in the region – specifically, as a result of its military-centred humanitarian infrastructure – can be further examined by in the context of the four pillars of the WPS Agenda.

## ASEAN’s Humanitarian Infrastructure through the Lens of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

### The 1<sup>st</sup> Pillar of WPS: Protection

The protection pillar of the WPS Agenda refers to safeguarding the rights of women in policies and institutions related to peace and security, including from all forms of SGBV in conflict, humanitarian and peacebuilding settings. Due in part to UNSCR 1325 drawing attention to SGBV, this need to protect women from SGBV has now become an important part of international policy agendas as seen by subsequent resolution UNSCR 1820, and its criminalisation under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.<sup>18</sup>

For a region such as Southeast Asia which relies heavily on its military for disaster response, this takes two forms. The first method is to protect women from ‘outside’ threats. As has become an unfortunately all too common consequence of societal stress, SGBV tends to exponentially increase in times of humanitarian emergencies including

---

<sup>14</sup> Trias and Cook, “Military humanitarian and disaster governance networks in Southeast Asia: framework and analysis”, 205–241: Canyon, Ryan and Burkle, “Rationale for Military Involvement in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief”, 92–97.

<sup>15</sup> ASEAN, “ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response”, 2009, p. 14, <https://ahacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/AADMER-DOCUMENT.pdf>;

<sup>16</sup> Trias and Cook, “Military humanitarian and disaster governance networks in Southeast Asia: framework and analysis”, 205–241

<sup>17</sup> Malesic, “The impact of military engagement in disaster management on civil–military relations”, 980-998.

<sup>18</sup> Alicia Luedke, Chloe Lewis, and Marisella Rodriguez, “Sexual Violence, Exploitation, and Abuse: Improving Prevention Across Conflicts and Crises”, *United States Institute of Peace*, November, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/sr415-sexual-violence-exploitation-and-abuse-improving-prevention-across-conflicts-and-crises.pdf>; UNWomen, “WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AND THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL.”; “Rule 93. Rape and Other forms of Sexual Violence”, Customary IHL, ICRC Database, accessed 1 May 2024, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule93>.

conflict, post-conflict and post-disaster settings.<sup>19</sup> This has been reflected in several post-disaster situations in the region including post-Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 and post-Cyclone Nargis in 2009.<sup>20</sup> As such, primary responders such as the military would need to be trained in assessing the needs of women who may have specific concerns such as age, pregnancy or disabilities, as well as in responding to situations of SGBV.

Secondly, to protect women from ‘inside’ threats. This acknowledges the elephant in the room – that of the unfortunate and yet, undeniable link between an increased militarised presence and increased rates of SGBV – specifically, SGBV involving the military and the people they are meant to assist.<sup>21</sup> For example, in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan, there were reports of SGBV being perpetrated on women and girls by security forces including the military.<sup>22</sup> This also included cases of sexual exploitation where women and girls were coerced into sexual activities in exchange for food.<sup>23</sup> These instances highlight the inherent ‘protection’ gaps and dangers to women in situations of increased militarisation.

## The 2<sup>nd</sup> Pillar of WPS: Prevention

The prevention pillar of the WPS Agenda refers to the prevention of all forms of violence towards women in times of peace and conflict. This also includes the development of intervention strategies in the prevention of violence against women, including by the prosecution of those responsible for such violations and supporting women’s peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives and processes.

In the region, the risks of SGBV during humanitarian emergencies and the need to prevent said risks are well-acknowledged. This is reflected through several ASEAN initiatives on disasters including the *ASEAN Regional Framework on Protection, Gender, and Inclusion in Disaster Management* and the related ASEAN Technical Working Group on Protection, Gender, And Social Inclusion.<sup>24</sup> This has also been topic of focus in national initiatives and laws such as the country-specific NAPs on WPS as seen in the Philippine NAP on WPS 2023 – 2033, in which the need for “[g]ender-sensitivity in all spaces and levels of governance” was highlighted as a preventive measures for the issue of SGBV in the process of transition from conflict to post-conflict situations.<sup>25</sup>

However, in order to fully commit to building peace and security institutions to prevent SGBV; to build gender-sensitive mechanisms to prevent SGBV, there is first a need for data on the context surrounding SGBV such as *how, when, where*, as well as *by* and *towards who*. Considering militaries are first responders during humanitarian emergencies in the region, militaries should also be monitoring, tracking and documenting situations involving SGBV, and in particular, those cases which are reported to involve military personnel. On the other hand, the challenge of such cases is the tendency by militaries to deal with these situations internally through military court, in order to maintain its jurisdiction over its own personnel, as well as the need to manage any potential fallout. This in turn may prevent true accountability and limit the effectiveness of such strategies in preventing SGBV.

---

<sup>19</sup> Alyssa Mari Thurston, Heidi Stöckl and Meghna Ranganathan, “Natural hazards, disasters and violence against women and girls: a global mixed-methods systematic review,” *BMJ Global Health* 6, no. 5 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2020-004377>

<sup>20</sup> Claudia Felten-Biermann, “Gender and Natural Disaster: Sexualized violence and the tsunami,” *Development* 49, no. (2006): 82–86, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.development.1100276>; “Unseen, Unheard Gender-Based Violence in Disasters Asia-Pacific case studies”, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, accessed 1 May 2024, <https://www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/GBV-in-disasters-AP-case-studies.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> United Nations, “Conflict Related Sexual Violence: Report of the United Nations Secretary-General”; Luedke, Lewis and Rodriguez, “Sexual Violence, Exploitation, and Abuse: Improving Prevention Across Conflicts and Crises”.

<sup>22</sup> Kristine, Aquino Valerio, “Storm of Violence, Surge of Struggle: Women in the Aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda)”, *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 20, no. 1 (2014): 148-163, <https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2014.11666177>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Regional Framework on Protection, Gender, and Inclusion in Disaster Management 2021-2025*, (ASEAN Secretariat: 2021), [https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/PGI\\_Framework\\_2021-2025.pdf](https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/PGI_Framework_2021-2025.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> National Steering Committee on Women, Peace and Security and Technical Working Group Members, *Philippine National Action Plan On Women, Peace And Security 2023-2033*, (Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unit: 2023), [https://wps.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Philippines\\_NAPWPS-2023-2033.pdf](https://wps.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Philippines_NAPWPS-2023-2033.pdf)

### The 3<sup>rd</sup> Pillar of WPS: Participation

The third pillar of the WPS Agenda, the ‘participation’ refers to the meaningful participation of women at all levels of decision-making in institutions and organisations related to peace and security – including the military. The emphasis on participation in the UNSCR 1325 and other WPS resolutions is very much predicated on one simple premise – without representation; without participation in decision-making process areas, women have limited opportunity to influence these decisions and therefore, less power and ability to meet their needs. This is particularly important in centralised, top-down, hierarchical organisations such as the military, where presence in senior leadership is necessary in order to effect any real change within the ranks.<sup>26</sup> However, it must also be noted that participation does not necessarily translate to representation and/or betterment for women, it is the *effectiveness* of that participation that is key. In other words, how did this participation improve the situation for women? For example, increased participation of women in security forces during humanitarian operations protects women. Not only in terms of physical protection from SGBV as exemplified by the presence of women leading to higher reporting of SGBV in humanitarian emergencies and lower rates of sexual exploitation and abuse, but there is also a link between the number of women legislators in a state’s government and the likelihood of that state’s military participating in humanitarian interventions.<sup>27</sup>

In line with this premise, the states around the world have regularly made statements expressing their support for increasing the participation of women in security organisations, as well as in peace and security processes around the world.<sup>28</sup> This is also the case in Southeast Asia, with governments in the region have been taking steps to increase the participation of women in organisations which play a significant part in humanitarian operations such as the military and law enforcement. For example, women constitute 10 percent of Indonesia’s military, 8 percent of Singapore’s and Philippines military and 2 percent of Vietnam’s military, with other ASEAN members having similar rates.<sup>29</sup> In terms of law enforcement, percentages of women range from 20 percent in Lao PDR to 6 percent in Indonesia, with some governments instituting quotas to promote women’s participation.<sup>30</sup> However, despite these quotas and other attempts as promoting women’s participation in such activities, rates still remain low across the region, and indeed the world, with only Israel achieving close to parity at 40 percent.<sup>31</sup> Reasons for this range from prevailing societal perceptions of women as a “vulnerable population” than active agents of change as reflected in the AADMER, as well as male insecurity in traditionally male-dominated societies and organisations – of which the military is foremost in the region. There is therefore more work that needs to be done change these perceptions in order to increase women’s participation in peace and security.

### The 4<sup>th</sup> Pillar of WPS: Relief and Recovery

The fourth pillar of the WPS Agenda, ‘relief and recover’, refers to the advancement of and access to gender-specific relief and recovery support by women in times of peace and security, including their role in the overall rebuilding and

---

<sup>26</sup>Adelheid A. M. Nicol and Amélie Mayrand Nicol, “Attitudes towards women in the military and their relation to both quantity and quality contact with female leaders,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 15, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1282835>

<sup>27</sup> Ellen Haring, “Gender and Military Organizations,” in *The Gender and Security Agenda: Strategies for the 21st Century*, ed. C.J Oudraat and M.E Brown, (Routledge, 2020), 90-112.; Patrick E. Shea and Charlotte Christian, “The Impact of Women Legislators on Humanitarian Military Interventions,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61, no. 10 (2016): 2043-2073, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002716631105>

<sup>28</sup> Haring, “Gender and Military Organizations,” 90 – 112.

<sup>29</sup> “Statistics”, Security Women, last accessed 1 May 2024, <https://www.securitywomen.org/resources/statistics>. ; Martin Sadongdong, “Women in AFP: Overcoming challenges in a male-dominated industry”, *Manila Bulletin*, March 7, 2023, <https://mb.com.ph/2023/03/07/women-in-afp-overcoming-challenges-in-a-male-dominated-industry>.; Joshua De Souza, “She Walked So Others Could Run,” *Pioneer*, Mar ch 8, 2024, <https://www.defencepioneer.sg/pioneer-articles/she-walked-so-others-could-run>

<sup>30</sup> “Women in law Enforcement in the ASEAN Region”, The International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), United Entity for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (UN Women) and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), UNODC, last accessed 1 May 2024, [https://www.unodc.org/roseap/uploads/archive/documents/Publications/2020/women\\_in\\_law\\_enforcement\\_in\\_the\\_asean\\_region\\_full.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/roseap/uploads/archive/documents/Publications/2020/women_in_law_enforcement_in_the_asean_region_full.pdf); Jennifer Howe, “Progress and Challenges to

Implementing Women, Peace and Security in Southeast Asia,” *Pacific Forum*, January, 2022, [https://pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/issuesinsights\\_Vol22WP1-Jan2022-Jennifer-Howe.pdf](https://pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/issuesinsights_Vol22WP1-Jan2022-Jennifer-Howe.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> Haring, “Gender and Military Organizations,” 90 – 112.

rehabilitation of societies.<sup>32</sup> In the context of the specific brand of military-centered humanitarianism that ASEAN espouses, this pillar can be expressed by the inclusion of a gender lens through which regional and national policies are developed and implemented. In other words, gender should be a key consideration for any and all humanitarian actors – including the military – in every point of response and relief operations.

In Southeast Asia, this realisation is just taking root. Although early ASEAN documents such as the *AADMER Work Programme 2010 – 2015*, tend to generally view women as “vulnerable groups” in need of developmental assistance, this perception on the role of women during humanitarian emergencies has since evolved with the regionalisation of the WPS Agenda and the acknowledgement of the importance of gender perspectives.<sup>33</sup> For example, the *ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security* explicitly highlighted the need to “mainstream gender in conflict and crisis prevention” through “centrally engag[ing] and consult[ing]” with women during the policy and planning of relief and response policies. This has also been reflected at the national level with the various NAPs and other national policy frameworks in various ASEAN countries including the Philippines – who was the first country in Asia to develop their NAP in 2010 – Indonesia, and most recently, Vietnam in April 2024.<sup>34</sup> In particular, Vietnam's NAP on WPS is set to include the need to integration a gendered lens into the development of rescue and recovery operations such as “war consequence handling, prevention and handling of disasters and non-traditional security challenges”.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, while policies for gender mainstreaming have been developed at the regional and national levels on WPS and humanitarian emergencies broadly, where are the similar policies for the militaries which play a significant role in relief operations? It has been made clear that security organisations play a starring role in implementing the WPS Agenda from theory to practice during humanitarian emergencies in the *ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security*.<sup>36</sup> However, the question still remains – how have these recommendations been translated into national policy on the ground? Other than the Armed Forces of the Philippines with their Gender and Development Program, gender mainstreaming in other ASEAN member state militaries – let alone in their relief policies – has clearly been insufficiently developed.<sup>37</sup> This gap between regional policy and actual implementation may be an opportunity for ASEAN member states to work together. In this case, through the region's premier defence cooperation mechanism, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), and specifically, through the ADMM Plus Expert Working Group on HADR. Consisting of the ten ASEAN member states and its eight Dialogue partners, the ADMM Plus works to strengthen security and defence cooperation for peace and stability in the region through its various expert working groups.<sup>38</sup> With its focus on defence cooperation in humanitarian emergencies, the ADMM Plus Expert Working Group on HADR would be an ideal platform for militaries to work together to expand their knowledge base and further coordinate their gender policies, perhaps even develop regional guidelines for gender mainstreaming during humanitarian emergencies.

---

<sup>32</sup> UNDP, *Parliaments as Partners Supporting the Women Peace and Security Agenda* (UNDP, 2019), [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Parliament\\_as\\_partners\\_supporting\\_the\\_Women\\_Peace\\_and\\_Security\\_Agenda\\_-\\_A\\_Global\\_Handbook.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Parliament_as_partners_supporting_the_Women_Peace_and_Security_Agenda_-_A_Global_Handbook.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> ASEAN Secretariat, “ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response” ASEAN Secretariat, 2013), <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2013-12.-Dec-AADMER-Work-Programme-4th-Reprint.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> Serena Nardi Ford, “Vietnam adopts the Women, Peace and Security agenda”, *The Strategist*, April 15, 2024, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/vietnam-adopts-the-women-peace-and-security-agenda/>.

<sup>35</sup> Huong Giang, “Gov't approves national action program on women, peace and security”, *Government News*, January 26, 2024, <https://en.baochinhphu.vn/govt-approves-national-action-program-on-women-peace-and-security-111240126210500761.htm>.

<sup>36</sup> ASEAN, *ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security*

<sup>37</sup> Angie Quadra-Balibay, “AFP intensifies gender equality for women in the military ranks”, *Good News Pilipinas*, April 26, 2018, [https://www.goodnewspilipinas.com/afp-intensifies-gender-equality-for-women-in-the-military-ranks/#google\\_vignette](https://www.goodnewspilipinas.com/afp-intensifies-gender-equality-for-women-in-the-military-ranks/#google_vignette)

<sup>38</sup> “About the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus”, ADMM ASEAN, last accessed 1 May 2024, <https://admm.asean.org/index.php/about-admm/about-admm-plus.html>

## Moving Forward...

Southeast Asia provides an insight into a future in which humanitarian response – particularly by states – are becoming increasingly militarised. With ASEAN's recent adoption of the WPS Agenda as a lens through which regional priorities and action can be translated to the local context, and its expansion of the scope 'security' to humanitarian disasters which are more prominent in the region, there has been a renewed focus on the role of all humanitarian actors, including and *especially*, the military – who have also taken on the role as first responders.

The question then remains – how does ASEAN mitigate the risks that seem to be inherent when militaries play a central role in high-stress situations – such as in the case of humanitarian emergencies? As explored through the four pillars of the WPS Agenda, this can be done through protecting the rights and safety of women in policies and institutions related to peace and security, preventing violence towards women in times of peace and conflict such as through the development of intervention strategies, increasing the meaningful participation of women at all levels of decision-making in institutions and organisations related to peace and security, as well as advancing gender-specific relief and recovery support by women in times of peace and security.

Considering the current geopolitical realities of the international system and the rapidly intensifying impacts of climate change around the world, the trend towards an increasing military presence in humanitarian operations is unlikely to falter. In this context, the importance of gender-sensitive policies rises as well. While women are disproportionately vulnerable in humanitarian emergencies, they are also active players in the humanitarian space – and it is a matter of increasing urgency that policymakers around the world acknowledge both sides. After all, women are half of the world's population and as the world heads into an increasingly uncertain future, advancing the needs of women will lead to tangible outcomes for the whole of humanity.



## About the Author

---

**S. Nanthini** is a Associate Research Fellow on the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Programme at the Centre of Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre) , S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) , Nanyang Technological University (NTU) , Singapore. She holds a Masters in International Relations (International Security) from the University of Melbourne, and a Bachelor of Arts (Politics and Gender Studies) from La Trobe University. During her time in Melbourne, she volunteered with the humanitarian response agency RedR Australia where she furthered her interest in the security aspects of humanitarian situations.

Prior to joining RSIS, Nanthini was an intern at the Asia-Europe Foundation in Singapore and has written for the *Young Diplomats* as their Regional Content Writer for Southeast Asia. Her research interests include human security in Southeast Asia, looking at the HADR landscape through a gendered lens and the role of multilateralism in the security architecture of the Asia-Pacific.

## About the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies

---

The **S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)** is a think tank and professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. An autonomous school, RSIS' mission is to be a leading research and graduate teaching institution in strategic and international affairs in the Asia Pacific. With the core functions of research, graduate education, and networking, it produces cutting- edge research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-Traditional Security, Cybersecurity, Maritime Security, and Terrorism Studies.



NTS Centre conducts research and produces policy-relevant analyses aimed at furthering awareness and building the capacity to address non-traditional security (NTS) issues and challenges in the Asia Pacific region and beyond. The Centre addresses knowledge gaps, facilitates discussions and analyses, engages policymakers, and contributes to building institutional capacity in Sustainable Security and Crises. The NTS Centre brings together myriad NTS stakeholders in regular workshops and roundtable discussions, as well as provides a networking platform for NTS research institutions in the Asia Pacific through the NTS-Asia Consortium.

For more details, please visit [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg) and <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/research/nts-centre>. Join us at our social media channels at [www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-social-media-channels](http://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-social-media-channels) or scan the QR code.