

PROGRESS AND  
CHALLENGES TO  
IMPLEMENTING  
WOMEN, PEACE  
AND SECURITY  
IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

BY JENNIFER HOWE

Issues and Insights  
Vol. 22, WP1  
January 2022



# Progress and Challenges to Implementing Women, Peace and Security in Southeast Asia

---

By  
Jennifer Howe

ISSUES & INSIGHTS

WORKING PAPER

VOL. 22, WP1 | January 2022

## **Pacific Forum**

Based in Honolulu, the Pacific Forum ([www.pacforum.org](http://www.pacforum.org)) is a foreign policy research institute focused on the Asia-Pacific Region. Founded in 1975, the Pacific Forum collaborates with a broad network of research institutes from around the Pacific Rim, drawing on Asian perspectives and disseminating project findings and recommendations to global leaders, governments, and members of the public throughout the region. The Forum's programs encompass current and emerging political, security, economic, and maritime policy issues, and works to help stimulate cooperative policies through rigorous research, analyses and dialogues.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>ABBREVIATIONS .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY: OVERVIEW .....</b>	<b>2</b>
UNSCR 1325 AND SUBSEQUENT RESOLUTIONS .....	3
THE GENDERED IMPACTS OF ARMED CONFLICT .....	4
<i>Gender-Based Violence (GBV)</i> .....	4
<i>The Economy</i> .....	5
<i>Political and Civic Activity</i> .....	6
<i>Health</i> .....	6
THE VALUE OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION .....	7
<b>SOCIETAL PROGRESS: SOUTHEAST ASIA .....</b>	<b>9</b>
GENDER INEQUALITY AS A DRIVER OF INSTABILITY .....	9
WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION .....	10
<i>Parliamentary Representation</i> .....	10
<i>Cabinet Members</i> .....	12
<i>National Leaders</i> .....	13
<b>ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<i>Corporate Leadership</i> .....	14
<i>Labor Force Participation</i> .....	14
<i>Informal Employment</i> .....	16
<i>Discrimination in the Workplace</i> .....	17
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT .....	18
<i>Tertiary-Level Education</i> .....	18
<i>Primary and Secondary-Level Education</i> .....	19
<i>Education, Poverty, and Instability</i> .....	19
<i>Gender Prejudice in Education</i> .....	20
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE .....	20
<i>Legal Frameworks</i> .....	21
<i>Sexual Violence</i> .....	21
<i>Domestic Violence</i> .....	22
<i>Child Marriage</i> .....	23
<i>Female Genital Mutilation</i> .....	24
<i>Sexual Harassment</i> .....	24
<i>COVID-19 and Gender-Based Violence</i> .....	25
SUMMARY .....	25
<b>WPS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA .....</b>	<b>26</b>
NATIONAL AND REGIONAL COMMITMENTS TO UNSCR 1325 .....	26
<i>The Philippines</i> .....	26
<i>Timor-Leste</i> .....	27
<i>Indonesia</i> .....	28
<i>Thailand</i> .....	28
<i>Myanmar</i> .....	29
<i>Vietnam</i> .....	29

<i>ASEAN</i> .....	30
<i>WPS-Related Activities in ASEAN</i> .....	30
<b>PARTICIPATION IN PEACE PROCESSES</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<i>Women's Civil Society Organizations</i> .....	31
<i>Inclusion in Official Peace Processes</i> .....	32
<b>PARTICIPATION IN NATIONAL SECURITY INSTITUTIONS</b> .....	<b>33</b>
<i>Government Efforts to Increase Women's Participation</i> .....	33
<i>Remaining Challenges</i> .....	34
<b>SUMMARY</b> .....	<b>35</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>36</b>
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</b> .....	<b>37</b>

---

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

---

October 2020 marked 20 years since the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), which is a cornerstone of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. To commemorate the 20th anniversary of its passage, this paper assesses the implementation of UNSCR 1325 across Southeast Asia. It provides an in-depth analysis of progress and challenges to realizing core WPS commitments and achieving gender equality in Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. These countries were selected because each has endured recent or ongoing conflict and instability. In addition, five of these states are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), allowing the study to explore the institutionalization of WPS within regional forums and how this shapes national-level WPS implementation.

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

**APSC:** ASEAN Political-Security Community

**ASEAN:** Association of Southeast Asian Nations

**ASEAN-IPR:** ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation

**BARMM:** Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao

**CMCP:** The Council of Muslim Women's Organization Cooperation for Peace

**CSO:** Civil Society Organization

**FGM:** Female Genital Mutilation

**GBV:** Gender-Based Violence

**IPV:** Intimate Partner Violence

**MCW:** Magna Carta for Women

**NAP:** National Action Plan

**NSPAW:** The National Strategic Plan for The Advancement of Women 2013-2022

**RAN P3A-KS:** National Action Plans for the Protection and Empowerment of Women and Children during Social Conflicts (Indonesia)

**RAP:** Regional Action Plan

**RPA on EVAW:** ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence Against Women

**RPCA:** The Royal Police Cadet Academy

**UN:** The United Nations

**UNSCR 1325:** UN Security Council Resolution 1325

**VAW:** Violence Against Women and Girls

**WEF:** The World Economic Forum

**WPS:** Women, Peace and Security

## **INTRODUCTION**

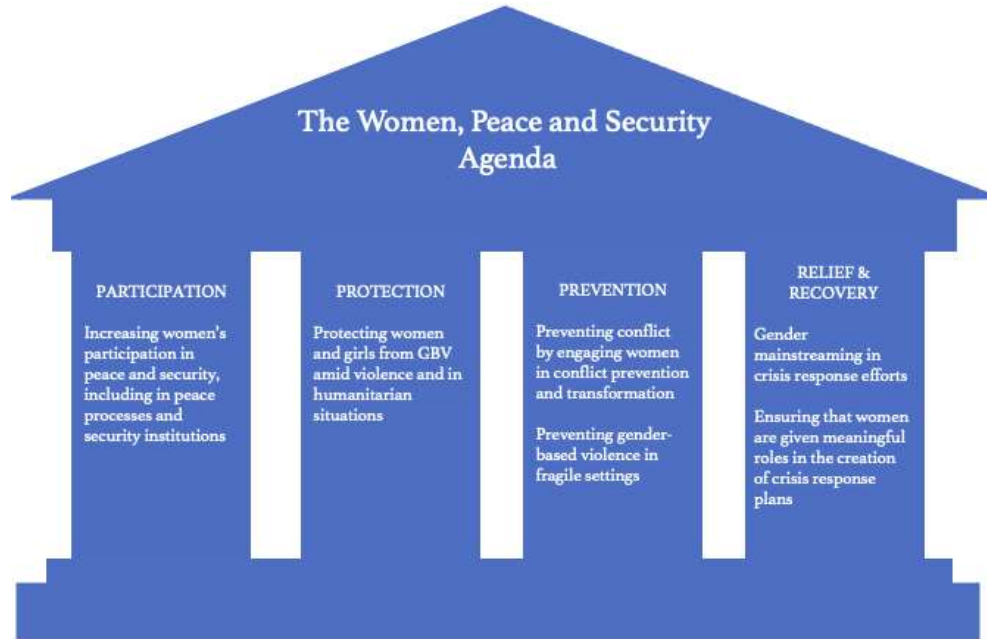
In October 2000, the United Nations (UN) unanimously adopted Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325). UNSCR 1325 is a cornerstone of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, which offers a policy framework for achieving equitable peace and advancing women's rights. To commemorate the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325, this paper analyzes its implementation in six Southeast Asian nations affected by recent or ongoing instability: Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. The decision to focus on these countries lies in their shared history of armed conflict and their differing approaches to institutionalizing the WPS agenda. In addition, five of the six countries are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), allowing the analysis to explore the interplay between regional- and national-level WPS implementation.

The paper is structured in three parts. The introductory section provides a comprehensive overview of the WPS agenda and explores the gendered impacts of armed conflict with a special emphasis on Southeast Asia. The second section evaluates gender inequality in the six case study countries by investigating women's political, economic, and social empowerment. In so doing, the analysis offers a holistic examination of sociocultural and institutional factors that may inhibit the implementation of WPS both nationally and regionally. The final section reflects on progress toward implementing UNSCR 1325 in Southeast Asia; it inspects which of the six countries in the sample have introduced WPS National Action Plans (NAPs) and assesses attempts by ASEAN to integrate aspects of the agenda into regional bodies and frameworks. It also investigates women's inclusion in formal peace processes and their representation in national security institutions.

## **WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY: OVERVIEW**

UNSCR 1325 arose from the need to formally recognize the gendered impacts of armed conflict and the critical role that women can, do, and should play in peacebuilding and formal peace processes. This section explores the gendered aspects of conflict and underscores the importance and benefits of strengthening women's participation in peace and security.





## UNSCR 1325 AND SUBSEQUENT RESOLUTIONS

The WPS agenda rests on four interlinked pillars—Participation, Protection, Prevention, and Relief and Recovery. Participation calls for women's full and equal participation across the peace and security continuum. Protection calls for the protection of women and girls from gender-based violence (GBV) amid conflict and instability. Prevention calls for preventing conflict by engaging women's groups and including women in peace processes, as well as the prevention of all forms of GBV in fragile settings. Relief and Recovery calls for enhancing gender-responsive relief and recovery and demands that women are given meaningful roles in the creation of relief and recovery plans.<sup>1</sup>

In the two decades since the adoption of UNSCR 1325, the UN has introduced 10 resolutions that have expanded and clarified the WPS agenda. These include UNSCR 1820 (2008), which categorized sexual violence as a war crime and instructed countries to train armed forces to respond to sexual assault. UNSCR 2122 (2013) provided a set of concrete methods for amplifying women's voices in peace processes. UNSCR 2242 (2015) drew attention to the intersection of gender and violent extremism, and urged states to apply a gendered perspective when developing countering and preventing violent extremism programs and counterterrorism strategies.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> UNDP, "Parliaments as Partners."

<sup>2</sup> "The Resolutions," PeaceWomen, <http://peacewomen.org/why-WPS/solutions/resolutions>.

## THE GENDERED IMPACTS OF ARMED CONFLICT

### Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

UNSCR 1325 acknowledged that individuals are exposed to different threats during conflict on account of their gender.<sup>3</sup> Conflict tends to exacerbate gender-based violence (GBV), which the UN defines as "harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender."<sup>4</sup> Examples of GBV include intimate partner violence (IPV), sexual assault, and sex trafficking. While acts of GBV are not restricted to a specific gender, the majority of victims are women.<sup>5</sup>

GBV often intensifies during periods of violent unrest because instability erodes the legal structures, social networks, and communities that protect women and girls, rendering them vulnerable to gendered crimes perpetrated by contesting armed groups and family or community members.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, GBV—particularly sexual violence—is frequently used against women and girls as a weapon of war and instrument for ethnic cleansing.<sup>7</sup> Conflict-related sexual violence is rife in West Papua, the location of a long-standing insurgency between Indonesian forces and Papua separatists. Indonesian security forces are known to use sexual violence against West Papuan women as a means of land-grabbing and as a form of punishment if their husbands are suspected to be members of the insurgent group.<sup>8</sup> Women living in Myanmar's conflict zones endure similar levels of abuse at the hands of national security forces. The use of sexual violence by the Myanmar military against Rohingya women and other ethnic groups in Northern Myanmar has been described as a "deliberate strategy to intimidate, terrorize, and punish the civilian population."<sup>9</sup> Women and girls who have been displaced by conflict are also acutely vulnerable to sexual violence, which is perpetrated by family members, other displaced individuals, and aid workers. Over 60% of adolescent girls residing in Rohingya refugee settlements in Bangladesh reported hearing about or witnessing sexual violence in a recently published study.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the lack of economic opportunities available to displaced populations in Myanmar puts women and girls at risk of sex trafficking. In conflict-affected states in Northern Myanmar, women have been trafficked from internally displaced people (IDPs) camps for forced marriages in China. The

---

<sup>3</sup> Louise Strachan and Huma Haider, "Impact of conflict on gender," (GSDRC, 2015), <https://gsdrc.org/topic-guides/gender-and-conflict/relationship-between-gender-and-conflict-the-evidence/impact-of-conflict-on-gender/#:~:text=One%20study%20found%20that%20conflict,%3B%20P1%C3%BCmper%20%26%20Neumayer%2C%20200>

<sup>4</sup> "Gender-Based Violence?" UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/gender-based-violence.html>

<sup>5</sup> "What is Gender-Based Violence?" European Commission.

<sup>6</sup> Department for International Development, "Violence against Women and Girls in Humanitarian Emergencies" (DFID, 2013),

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/271932/VAWG-humanitarian-emergencies.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/271932/VAWG-humanitarian-emergencies.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "Parliaments as Partners Supporting the Women Peace and Security Agenda" (Oslo: UNDP, 2019), <https://www.undp.org/content.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Szilvia Csevar, "Sexualised Violence and Land Grabbing: Forgotten Conflict and Ignored Victims in West Papua," *London School of Economics*, August 2019, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2019/08/21/sexualised-violence-and-land-grabbing-forgotten-conflict-and-ignored-victims-in-west-papua/>

<sup>9</sup> Park and Pelletier, "Gender, Violence and Ethnic Conflict in Myanmar."

<sup>10</sup> Nicola Jones, "Age- and gender-based violence facing Rohingya and Bangladeshi adolescents in Cox's Bazar," (ODI, 2020), <https://odi.org/en/publications/age-and-gender-based-violence-risks-facing-rohingya-and-bangladeshi-adolescents-in-coxs-bazar/>

dearth of documentation for IDPs has allowed human trafficking to go largely unchecked in these states.<sup>11</sup>

Various factors, including militarized masculinities,<sup>12</sup> the normalization of violence, shifting marriage practices, and a breakdown in law enforcement combine to aggravate rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) in volatile settings.<sup>13</sup> A 2018 study found that an estimated 14% of West Papuan women experience IPV.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the psychological impacts of Timor-Leste's lengthy struggle for independence from Indonesia, which ended in 1999, continue to affect IPV rates in the country. Intergenerational trauma, the normalization of violence, and a culture shaped by militarized masculinities have contributed to inordinately high rates of domestic violence among the East Timorese population.<sup>15</sup>

## The Economy

Armed conflict can alter traditional gender roles in the economic sphere while also placing additional financial strain on women. Men are often absent from communities during times of war because they are away fighting or die in battle. The scarcity of male breadwinners can compel women to seek paid work outside the home.<sup>16</sup> However, in disrupting the social fabric of society, conflict wreaks havoc on traditional livelihoods and impairs the formal economy.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, women who are forced to find paid work may lack adequate training or education. As a result, it is customary for conflict-affected women to secure low-skilled and low-paid informal-sector work. For example, the Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste prompted many East Timorese women to engage in paid employment outside the household. However, these women tended to work in precarious informal-sector roles, for instance as street sellers, market vendors, and agricultural laborers.<sup>18</sup>

Steep rates of poverty often occur among women-headed households following the cessation of war. This has been attributed to the absence of additional familial income, the dual burden of household responsibilities and financial pressures, and patriarchal legal systems and power structures that disadvantage women landowners.<sup>19</sup> A 2015 examination of women's land rights in Myanmar found that a host of formal and informal barriers prevented women war

---

<sup>11</sup> Park and Pelletier, "Gender, Violence and Ethnic Conflict in Myanmar."

<sup>12</sup> Defined as a "combination of traits and attitudes that are hyper-masculine...and associated with the military." Hayley Lopes, "Militarized Masculinity in Peacekeeping Operations: An Obstacle to Gender Mainstreaming," *PeacebuildPaixDurable*.

<sup>13</sup> GIWPS and PRIO, "Women, Peace, and Security Index 2017/18: Tracking Sustainable Peace through Inclusion, Justice, and Security for Women" (Washington DC: Georgetown University, 2018), <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Chapter-3-Why-Security-Is-Important.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> International Coalition for Papua (ICP), "Human Rights and Conflict Escalation in West Papua" (Wuppertal, Germany: ICP, 2020) <https://www.freewestpapua.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Human-Rights-And-Conflict-Escalation-In-West-Papua.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> CARE, "CARE Rapid Gender Analysis of COVID-19 Timor-Leste," (April 2020), <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20200515%20Timor-Leste%20Rapid%20Gender%20Analysis%20COVID-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Strachan and Haider, "Impact of conflict on gender."

<sup>17</sup> Claire Duncanson, "Is women's economic empowerment the key to global prosperity and peace?" IFJP, 2019, <https://www.ifjglobal.org/blog/2019/1/25/is-womens-economic-empowerment-the-key-to-global-prosperity-and-peace>

<sup>18</sup> GIWPS and PRIO, "Women, Peace, and Security Index 2017/18."

<sup>19</sup> Margarat Owen, "Conflict Widows: Agents of Change and Peacebuilding," *Open Democracy*, June 10, 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/conflict-widows-agents-of-change-and-peacebuilding/>

widows from obtaining land.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, women who have been widowed by the conflict between Malay Muslim insurgents and state forces in Southern Thailand have spoken about the challenges they face in providing for their families.<sup>21</sup> War widows in Aceh, a province of Indonesia that was blighted by conflict between 1976-2005, continue to be impacted by the loss of their husbands. A study conducted in 2019—14 years after the cessation of hostilities in Aceh—found that war widows in the province are still reeling from the effects of the insurgency. Sixteen war widows were interviewed for Strandh and Yuszira's research, some of whom said the fate of their husband remains unknown. Many of the respondents spoke about financial uncertainty following their spouses' deaths, describing Aceh as achieving "uneconomic peace," or peace without economic security.<sup>22</sup>

## Political and Civic Activity

Women's civic and political engagement often increases in times of war. Conflict-affected women regularly come together to form civil society organizations with diverse agendas, such as militant groups and peacebuilding networks. This can be seen in Myanmar, where women have played a key role in protesting the 2021 military coup.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, a report published last year found that a growing number of women are electing to join Myanmar's Arakan Army in part due to relentless military aggression that disproportionately harms women and children.<sup>24</sup>

In most cases, however, women are unable to formalize gains in the political and civic spheres after conflict ends. Post-conflict societies may experience a resurgence in patriarchal norms, which can prevent women from participating in politics and fuel backlash to women's political mobilization.<sup>25</sup> This can be seen in Timor-Leste where women who joined the resistance movement as active combatants or in supportive roles have been systematically overlooked by officials. For example, the government's pension scheme for veterans of the independence movement does not extend to former women combatants.<sup>26</sup>

## Health

Armed conflict has different health implications for different parts of the population. Men often comprise the majority of battle-related casualties, while refugee settlements tend to house more women and children than men.<sup>27</sup> There are more than 12 million displaced individuals in East Asia and the Pacific, many of whom have fled natural disasters and

---

<sup>20</sup> Hilary Faxon, Roisin Furlong and May Sabe Phyu, 'Reinvigorating resilience: violence against women, land rights, and the women's peace movement in Myanmar' (Gender & Development 23:3, 2015)

<sup>21</sup> Laura Villadiego, "Insurgency, Conflict and Trauma – The Tale of the Thai Widows," *Contributoria*, 2014, <http://www.contributoria.com/issue/2014-12/54379dcd2474c5502e000021.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Veronica Strandh and Benni Yuszira, "War Widows' Everyday Understanding of Peace in Aceh, Indonesia," *The Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* (2021).

<sup>23</sup> "Myanmar's Women Are Fighting for a New Future After a Long History of Military Oppression," *Time Magazine*, May 2021, <https://time.com/6052954/myanmar-women-military/>

<sup>24</sup> The New Humanitarian, "Why more women are joining Myanmar's Arakan Army insurgency," 18 Nov, 2020, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/11/18/myanmar-women-army-arakan-rakhine-female-soldiers-peace>

<sup>25</sup> Herbert, "Links Between Women's Empowerment (or lack of) and Outbreaks of Violent Conflict."

<sup>26</sup> Vincent Bevins, "'Violence has not left our homes': the fight goes on for female guerillas in Timor-Leste," *The Guardian*, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/dec/29/female-guerillas-denied-liberation-timor-leste-war-independence>

<sup>27</sup> Strachan and Haider, "Impact of conflict on gender."

conflict.<sup>28</sup> Women and children constitute a large proportion of this figure. For example, more than three-quarters (77%) of all IDPs in Myanmar are women and children. Overcrowding, inaccessible healthcare, and a scarcity of food and water in displaced settings contribute to widespread illness and susceptibility to disease. Compounding this issue is the fact that displaced women struggle more than men to access healthcare due to gendered expectations and norms. According to a 2019 Oxfam study, 9% of women IDPs in Maguindanao, a province in Mindanao, Southern Philippines—the site of a five-decade-long insurgency—had never received a health check-up. The reasons cited included a shortage of healthcare workers, domestic responsibilities preventing women from leaving their homes, and cultural practices that require women and girls to gain permission from their husbands or fathers before attending a health facility.<sup>29</sup>

Women are also at a heightened risk of health problems related to reproduction. Research suggests that maternal mortality rates increase during periods of intense conflict.<sup>30</sup> Southern Thailand has the highest maternal mortality rate in the country.<sup>31</sup> The determinants of maternal morbidity in conflict scenarios include limited sexual and reproductive health services and the prevalence of early marriage in conflict settings (complications are common in adolescent pregnancies).<sup>32</sup>

## THE VALUE OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

### Women as Peacebuilders

To lessen the severity of the gendered consequences of conflict, UNSCR 1325 called for incorporating women's needs and amplifying their voices in peace processes. UNSCR 1325 also recognized that women are powerful agents in managing and mitigating conflict. The WPS agenda is grounded in the understanding that women's participation in peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction reduces the likelihood of renewed war and contributes to long-term stability. The Council on Foreign Relations states that the involvement of women's groups in peace talks makes the resulting agreement 64% more likely to succeed.<sup>33</sup>

Krause et al. believe that the inclusion of women in peace negotiations leads to lasting settlements because women negotiators are more likely to reach out to grassroots women's groups. These groups are able to provide negotiators with local, context-specific knowledge, and monitor the implementation of peace agreements.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, during negotiations, women are more likely than men to raise issues that can accelerate societal reconstruction

---

<sup>28</sup> "People Living in Displacement" IDMC, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2021/>

<sup>29</sup> Abo and Ayao, "Violence or the Virus? Mindanao's Displaced Forced to Choose," *The New Humanitarian*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2020/06/01/Philippines-Mindanao-coronavirus-violence-womengirls>

<sup>30</sup> Strachan and Haider, "Impact of conflict on gender."

<sup>31</sup> Worawan Chandoevvit et al., "Improving the Measurement of Maternal Mortality in Thailand Using Multiple Data Sources," *Population Health Metrics* 14, no. 16, (2016).

<sup>32</sup> International Crisis Group, "The Hidden Face of Conflict – Maternal Mortality," (Dec 2018, *WEF*),

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/12/the-hidden-face-of-conflict-maternal-mortality/>

<sup>33</sup> "Women's Participation in Peace Processes," Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/>.

<sup>34</sup> Jana Krause, Werner Krause and Piia Branfors, "Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace," *International Interactions*, 44(6) (2018), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2018.1492386>.

and conflict transformation (i.e., issues that address the root causes of conflict and prevent its resurgence). Whereas male negotiators typically gravitate toward military disarmament and power-sharing provisions, women often draw attention to social and economic recovery, political and legal reforms, transitional justice, and tactics to prevent GBV.<sup>35</sup> Addressing GBV is particularly important to averting a reignition of conflict where sexual violence has been used as an instrument for war and ethnic cleansing.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, mainly because they do not control fighting forces and operate outside existing power structures, women are often seen as “honest brokers” in peace negotiations. Being viewed in this light causes women to be seen as politically impartial, which enables them to conduct consultations with opposing parties behind the scenes.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the positive outcomes of their participation in peace talks, few women have been included in formal mediation efforts. Between 1992-2019, just 6% of all signatories to peace agreements were women.<sup>38</sup> Women remain on the fringes of negotiations for a variety of reasons, including patriarchal socio-cultural prejudices that paint them as the victims of conflict rather than agents of peace (and sometimes violence), threats to the physical integrity of women who participate in peace processes, and a lack of political will to foreground women’s perspectives in mediation efforts.<sup>39</sup>

## **Women as Security Personnel**

Increasing the number of women security personnel—a fundamental principle of the WPS agenda—has multiple strategic advantages and can benefit the welfare of wider society. Encouraging the entire population, including both men and women, to participate in military organizations and law enforcement is strategically beneficial as it diversifies the skills, talents, and capabilities of security actors.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, deploying mixed-gender teams during military interventions can enhance intelligence-gathering and improve civil-military relations. This is because women personnel may be able to interact with other women and children, which facilitates information sharing and fosters a sense of trust between the military and local communities.<sup>41</sup> Strengthening women’s participation in law enforcement is linked to improve perceptions of institutional legitimacy, which positively influences police-community cooperation. This link may relate to the fact that women law enforcement officers are more likely than their male peers to be in favor of community policing (i.e., working closely with communities), and less likely to support the use of excessive force.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> “Women’s Participation in Peace Processes,” CFR

<sup>36</sup> Sarah Tylor, “Five Frequently Asked Questions on the Inclusion of Women in Peace Processes,” The Global Observatory, Aug 2018, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2018/08/five-questions-inclusion-women-peace-processes/>

<sup>37</sup> “Women’s Participation in Peace Processes,” CFR

<sup>38</sup> “Women’s Participation in Peace Processes.” CFR.

<sup>39</sup> GIZ, “Promoting Women’s Participation in Peace Negotiations and Peace Processes,” (2014), [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/features/features-working-women/working-with-women/docs/2014-05-08\\_toolkit\\_promoting-womens-participation-peace-neg\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/features/features-working-women/working-with-women/docs/2014-05-08_toolkit_promoting-womens-participation-peace-neg_en.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> UN Women, “Women in Law Enforcement in the ASEAN Region,” (2020), <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/08/women-in-law-enforcement-in-the-asean-region>

<sup>41</sup> “Women in Peacekeeping,” UN Peacekeeping, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/women-peacekeeping>.

<sup>42</sup> UN Women, “Women in Law Enforcement in the ASEAN Region.”

Some anecdotal evidence suggests that women security personnel may be more skilled at responding to crimes of a sexual nature than men. Moreover, their presence in military interventions is associated with lower levels of sexual exploitation and sexual violence.<sup>43</sup> Finally, women troops and law enforcement officers act as role models to the communities they serve, demonstrating to women and girls that it is possible to transcend traditional economic roles.<sup>44</sup>

## **SOCIETAL PROGRESS: SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Advancing women's status in the political, economic, and social spheres is intimately linked with the overarching goals of the WPS agenda.<sup>45</sup> Failing to achieve gender equality in these areas can exacerbate instability and strengthen formal and informal barriers to WPS implementation. As such, evaluating wider societal progress toward achieving gender equality is central to understanding institutional and societal factors that influence—and negatively impact—the localization of WPS in Southeast Asia.

### **GENDER INEQUALITY AS A DRIVER OF INSTABILITY**

There is ample evidence that countries with high rates of gender inequality are at elevated risk of conflict and instability.<sup>46</sup> Recent outbreaks of violence in Southeast Asia substantiate and elucidate the relationship between gender inequality and instability. The exclusion of women from Myanmar's political institutions has been cited as a factor that enabled the 2021 military coup. The 2008 constitution, which was established by Myanmar's military and ushered in a period of partial democracy, barred women from attaining influential political positions. It has been argued that the deliberate exclusion of women from positions of political power prevented civilians from participating in Myanmar's politics, thereby enabling the military to maintain its presence in decision-making roles and expand its political grip, making it easier for them to stage a coup.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, recent studies carried out by Monash University illustrate that sexist attitudes are closely connected with violent extremism in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. After conducting surveys in each of these countries, True et al. observed that individuals who supported violence against women were three times more likely to support extremism than those who did not hold these views. Sexist attitudes were also found to be an integral component of Southeast Asian extremist ideologies. The authors note that support for violence against women was a far better determinant of support for extremism than an individual's economic, social, or religious background.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> UN, "Deployment of Female Personnel Boosts Effectiveness, Says Secretary-General," Apr 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13773.doc.htm>

<sup>44</sup> "Women in Peacekeeping," UN Peacekeeping.

<sup>45</sup> USIP, "What is UNSCR 1325?" [https://www.usip.org/gender\\_peacebuilding/about\\_UNSCR\\_1325](https://www.usip.org/gender_peacebuilding/about_UNSCR_1325)

<sup>46</sup> Herbert, "Links Between Women's Empowerment (or lack of) and Outbreaks of Violent Conflict."

<sup>47</sup> Gabrielle Bardall and Elin Bjarnegard, "The Exclusion of Women in Myanmar Politics Helped Fuel the Military Coup," *The Conversation*, Feb 21, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/the-exclusion-of-women-in-myanmar-politics-helped-fuel-the-military-coup-154701>

<sup>48</sup> Jacqui True, Eleanor Gordon, and Melissa Johnson, "Gender Equality and Violent Extremism: A Research Agenda (2017-2019), (Monash University, 2019), <https://www.monash.edu/arts/gender-peace-security/gender-and-violent-extremism> this is a UN Women report so perhaps use that link refers to two papers – one for Libya: [https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20arab%20states/attachments/publications/2019/11/monash\\_genderequality\\_violentextremis](https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20arab%20states/attachments/publications/2019/11/monash_genderequality_violentextremis)

Gender inequality and gender-based violence may also incentivize women to participate in armed groups, thereby prolonging conflict. According to local civil society organizations (CSOs) in Myanmar, a growing number of women are joining the Arakan Army<sup>49</sup> in part because they want to fight military aggression that disproportionately targets women and children. These women also see joining combat as preferable to entering IDP camps where they are likely to fall victim to gendered violence.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, though women's motives for engaging in violent extremism are complex and multifaceted, extremist organizations often use messages of gender empowerment to attract women. An analysis of online extremist content used to recruit women from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines found that regardless of the propaganda's subject matter, the underlying message was one of empowerment.<sup>51</sup>

## WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Women's political participation is a core goal of UNSCR 1325 and critical to reducing gender inequality and cultivating peace.<sup>52</sup> In part this relates to the fact that women politicians are more likely than their male counterparts to draw attention to women's issues while in office.<sup>53</sup> Women leaders also tend to prioritize policies that promote health, education, and the distribution of wealth. Broadening the political agenda to meet the population's needs is tied to greater prosperity, development, and stability.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, women decision-makers are less likely to resort to violence to resolve social disputes and international crises than their male counterparts, making their political inclusion crucial to strengthening peace and stability.<sup>55</sup>

### Parliamentary Representation

Women's political participation is steadily improving in Southeast Asia. Several states have enacted quotas based on the critical mass theory—the belief that women must comprise at least 30 per cent of lawmakers in order to constitute a large minority within national Parliaments.<sup>56</sup> Indonesia introduced a quota in 2003 which requires all political parties to ensure that 30% of their candidates are women.<sup>57</sup> In response to persistent pressure from

---

[m\\_paper\\_art2.pdf?la=en&vs=638](#) and one for asia: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/05/academic-paper-a-gender-sensitive-approach-to-empowering-women-for-peaceful-communities>

<sup>49</sup> An ethnic armed organization based in the state of Arakan.

<sup>50</sup> The New Humanitarian, "Why more women are joining Myanmar's Arakan Army insurgency," 18 Nov, 2020, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/11/18/myanmar-women-army-arakan-rakhine-female-soldiers-peace>

<sup>51</sup> Hanny Cueva-Betata and Lesli Davis eds., "Who's Behind the Keyboard? A Gender Analysis of Terrorism and Violent Extremism in the Online Space in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines" (UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 2019).

<sup>52</sup> Ashild Falch, "Resolution 1325 and Women's Political Participation," *PRIO*, 2010, <https://www.prio.org/Projects/Project/?x=1462>

<sup>53</sup> Women Deliver, "Why Women in Politics?" Feb 2018, <https://womendeliver.org/2018/why-women-in-politics/>

<sup>54</sup> Women Deliver, "Why Women in Politics?"

<sup>55</sup> Henderson, Domingues, and Knudsen-Latta, "Promoting Women's Political Participation: A Pathway to Peace," p. 3

<sup>56</sup> Jude Browne, "The Critical Mass Marker Approach: Female Quotas and Social Justice." *Political Studies* 62 (2014).

<sup>57</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on Indonesia," 2019, <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/ID.pdf>



women activists, the East Timorese government adopted a quota in 2007 which stipulated that one in three candidates proposed by a party must be female.<sup>58</sup> Vietnam established a 35% quota for women on electoral lists in 2015.<sup>59</sup>

As of January 2021, women comprised 38% of Timor-Leste's Parliament, making it the only country in the list to meet its quota.<sup>60</sup> Despite not having a formal quota, the Philippines boasts a greater number of women parliamentarians than Vietnam and Indonesia. At the time of writing, women comprise 28% of the Philippine National Assembly.<sup>61</sup> Women are evenly distributed in the Upper and Lower Houses of the Philippine Parliament (28% of the Lower House and 29% of the Upper House).<sup>62</sup> The even allocation of women across both houses indicates that the Philippines has avoided granting women token legislative roles. However, women's parliamentary representation in the Philippines has declined slightly since 2018, when women held 29% of seats.<sup>63</sup> Vietnam is yet to reach its 35% target. Today, women constitute 27% of the Vietnamese National Assembly—a figure that has stagnated since the 1990s.<sup>64</sup> As of 2021, 21% of Indonesian parliamentarians are women.<sup>65</sup> Although this figure marks an improvement from 2019 when women held 17% of seats, it still falls short of the 30% quota.<sup>66</sup> In Thailand, a country that has oscillated between democracy and military rule, the number of women in the national legislature, though growing, remains minimal. Women constitute 16% of Thailand's National Assembly, up 11 percentage points from 2018.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on Timor-Leste," 2019, <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/TL.pdf>

<sup>59</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on Vietnam," 2019, <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/VN.pdf>

<sup>60</sup> UN Women, "Women in Politics: 2021," <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/03/women-in-politics-map-2021>.

<sup>61</sup> UN Women, "Women in Politics: 2021."

<sup>62</sup> "ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security," ASEAN, 2021

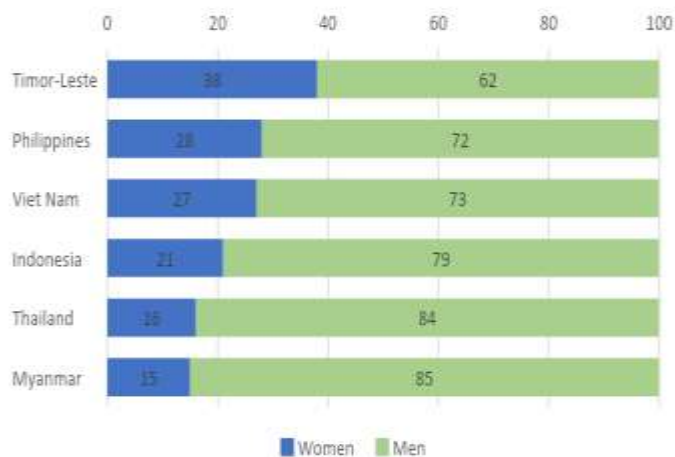
<sup>63</sup> "Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%) – Timor-Leste, Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam," World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS?locations=TL-PH-ID-TH-VN-MM>.

<sup>64</sup> "Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%) – Timor-Leste, Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam," World Bank.

<sup>65</sup> UN Women, "Women in Politics: 2021."

<sup>66</sup> "Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%) – Timor-Leste, Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam," World Bank

<sup>67</sup> "Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%) – Timor-Leste, Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam," World Bank.



The share of women in Myanmar's parliament grew from less than 5% in 2014<sup>68</sup> to 15% in January 2021.<sup>69</sup> However, this percentage reflects the composition of Myanmar's Parliament prior to the 2021 military coup. Since the start of the coup, the military junta, which has historically opposed women's political leadership, has unseated Aung San Suu Kyi as head of state and removed a large number of politicians from Myanmar's legislature, supreme court, and Cabinet, replacing them with military supporters. Almost all the new appointees are male.<sup>70</sup>

**Table 1: Percentage of parliamentarians by gender as of January 2021.<sup>71</sup>**

### Cabinet Members

Women's representation in ministerial positions is an important indicator of their meaningful—as opposed to token—political participation. Women in Timor-Leste's Cabinet have avoided being pigeonholed in "soft industries" commonly reserved for women ministers, such as healthcare and wellbeing. Instead, they have served as ministers of finance and justice, which are often regarded as "masculine" domains.<sup>72</sup> Indonesia has also made headway in this area—the current Cabinet boasts the greatest number of women in Indonesia's history.<sup>73</sup>

Despite these apparent gains, all countries in the sample performed relatively poorly in the UN's 2021 list of women in politics, which ranked 193 countries according to the proportion of women in ministerial positions.<sup>74</sup> Indonesia achieved the highest rating of the countries surveyed here, 113 of 182 places. However, there is clearly scope for improvement considering that just 6 of 35 ministers in Indonesia's Cabinet are women. Timor-Leste was placed 124 of 182, with just 3 women among 20 ministers. The Philippines came in at 135, with 3 of 23 Cabinet members being women.<sup>75</sup> The World Economic Forum (WEF) expressed concern over the declining number of women in the Philippine Cabinet (25% in

<sup>68</sup> Bardall and Bjarnegard, "The Exclusion of Women in Myanmar Politics Helped Fuel the Military Coup."

<sup>69</sup> UN Women, "Women in Politics: 2021."

<sup>70</sup> Michelle Onello and Akila Radhakrishnan, "Myanmar's Coup is Devastating for Women," *Foreign Policy*, Mar 23, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/23/myanmar-coup-women-human-rights-violence-military/>

<sup>71</sup> UN Women, "Women in Politics: 2021."

<sup>72</sup> Ameerah Haq, "The Role of Women in Making and Building Peace," *UN Chronicle*, <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/role-women-making-and-building-peace>.

<sup>73</sup> Bhardwaj, Gitika and Dunstan, Isabel (2019). *Women are Transforming Indonesia*. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/how-women-are-transforming-indonesia> (Accessed 27 April 2020).

<sup>74</sup> UN Women, "Women in Politics: 2021."

<sup>75</sup> UN Women, "Women in Politics: 2021."

2017 compared to 13% in 2021).<sup>76</sup> Thailand and Vietnam tied at 182 of 182, with women currently absent from their Cabinets.<sup>77</sup> Myanmar came in at 178, owing to the fact that in January 2021, its Cabinet included just one woman among 25 members.<sup>78</sup> However, this position corresponds to the configuration of Myanmar's Cabinet prior to the 2021 military coup. Just one woman is among the 16 serving in the State Administrative Council, which was created by the military after it seized power. The woman in question, Daw Aye Nu Sein, is a vocal critic of Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy party.<sup>79</sup>

## National Leaders

A number of Southeast Asian countries have been governed by women. The Philippines became the first country in Southeast Asia to have a woman president when Corazon Aquino was inaugurated in 1986. Megawati Sukarnoputri became the first woman president of Indonesia in 2001. Thailand's first woman prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra, rose to power in 2011. Aung San Suu Kyi became the *de facto* leader of Myanmar in 2016, having been a national symbol of democracy prior to her appointment as State Counsellor.<sup>80</sup> In 2018, Vietnam's first woman president, Dang Thi Ngoc Thinh, was sworn in following the death of her predecessor.<sup>81</sup>

However, women who have reached the highest political offices in Southeast Asia have typically done so via patrilineal connections. Corazon Aquino was the wife of a well-known senator who was assassinated three years before she rose to power. Thailand's Yingluck Shinawatra is the sister of former president, Thaksin Shinawatra. Women leaders of Indonesia and Myanmar were the daughters of the "founding fathers" of their nations. As such, it is difficult to ascertain whether these women became rulers because of evolving attitudes toward women's leadership, or if it was because the public viewed them as "symbols of their husbands, brothers, and fathers."<sup>82</sup> In a similar vein, women's rights activists in Vietnam viewed Ngoc Thinh's presidency as relating more to party politics than gender equality. In addition, Andaya notes that once women in Southeast Asia reach positions of power, they typically avoid championing gender equality so as not to alienate male voters.<sup>83</sup>

The 2021 military takeover in Myanmar is a stark reminder that having a woman head of state is not necessarily a precursor to greater gender diversity in political institutions, particularly where gains in women's political participation have not been formalized. It has been argued that the critical underrepresentation of women in Myanmar's political landscape allowed the military to maintain their grip on power. The military excluded women at each stage of Myanmar's democratic transition and blocked them from acquiring influential political

---

<sup>76</sup> World Economic Forum (WEF), "The Global Gender Gap Report 2020," (Geneva, Switzerland: World Economic Forum, 2020): [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2020.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf)

<https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/B20%20Gender%20Equality%20Report%20v10-3-E.pdf>

<sup>77</sup> UN Women, "Women in Politics: 2020."

<sup>78</sup> UN Women, "Women in Politics: 2020."

<sup>79</sup> Onello and Radhakrishnan, "Myanmar's Coup is Devastating for Women."

<sup>80</sup> Jacqui True et al., "Women's Political Participation in Asia and the Pacific," (Conflict Prevention & Peace Forum, 2012), <https://iknowpolitics.org/sites/default/files/undpa-womens-political-participation-in-asia-and-the-pacific.pdf>.

<sup>81</sup> Jared Ferrie, "Vietnam Has First Female President, But Activists are Unimpressed," *Reuters*, Sep 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-politics-women/vietnam-has-first-female-president-but-activists-are-unimpressed-idUSKCN1M41GG>.

<sup>82</sup> True et al., "Women's Political Participation in Asia and the Pacific."

<sup>83</sup> Barbara Watson Andaya, "Women in Southeast Asia," *Center for Global Education*, <https://asiasociety.org/education/women-southeast-asia>.

positions.<sup>84</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership style is also regarded as complicating the matter—though she successfully reconceptualized notions of motherhood to fit with leadership ideals, Bardall and Bjanegard argue that "her projected femininity and democratic idealism should not be confused with feminism and inclusive democracy."<sup>85</sup> Myanmar illustrates that women's meaningful political participation cannot be achieved through a single woman leader, but instead through the comprehensive inclusion of women at all levels of decision-making.<sup>86</sup>

## ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

Despite its relevance to gender equality and conflict prevention, women's economic empowerment is often neglected by the WPS agenda. This omission has been criticized by feminist scholars who argue that the agenda emphasizes wartime victimhood at the expense of women's material empowerment.<sup>87</sup> Enhancing women's economic participation is central to reducing structural inequalities. For instance, women's financial security correlates to lower rates of GBV, in part because financial independence provides resilience against domestic violence and because mothers are able to invest in their daughters' education, reducing the likelihood of underage marriage. Moreover, boosting economic productivity among women enables them to obtain the financial resources needed to launch a political career.<sup>88</sup> Closing the gender gap in the economy also paves the way to poverty reduction—it is believed that closing gender imbalances in labor force participation rates would add between 15-25% to global GDP. As widespread poverty facilitates conflict, boosting economic growth is important to averting instability.<sup>89</sup>

### Corporate Leadership

In contrast to the political picture, Southeast Asian countries are some of the global leaders when it comes to women's representation in senior corporate roles. In 2021, the Philippines topped a list of 32 economies for the second consecutive year for having the most women in senior managerial positions. Grant Thornton's "International Women in Business Report" revealed that women currently hold close to half (48%) of all senior managerial roles in the Philippines, up 5 percentage points from 2020. Of the countries in this sample, the Philippines was followed by Vietnam (39%), Indonesia (38%), and Thailand (34%).<sup>90</sup> In 2020, UN Women praised Thailand for being among the leading countries globally for women's economic leadership—just under a quarter of the country's CEOs and Managing Directors are women.<sup>91</sup>

### Labor Force Participation

Despite making significant headway in women's corporate leadership, the proportion of working-age women in the workforce varies from country to country. In most cases, there is

---

<sup>84</sup> Bardall and Bjanegard, "The Exclusion of Women in Myanmar Politics Helped Fuel the Military Coup."

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Duncanson, "Is women's economic empowerment the key to global prosperity and peace?"

<sup>88</sup> Henderson, Domingues, and Knudsen-Latta, "Promoting Women's Political Participation: A Pathway to Peace."

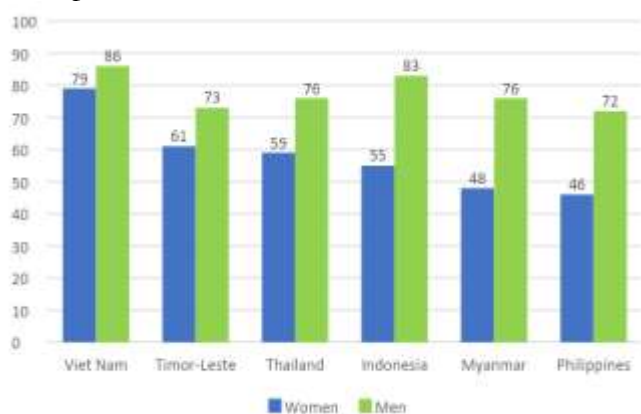
<sup>89</sup> Herbert, "Links Between Women's Empowerment (or lack of) and Outbreaks of Violent Conflict."

<sup>90</sup> BusinessWorld, "PHL tops 'Women in Business' Survey," February 2021, <https://www.bworldonline.com/phl-tops-women-in-business-survey/>

<sup>91</sup> UN Women, "Achieving Gender Equality Key to Restoring Economic Resilience in Asia," Sep 2020, <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org>.

a considerable chasm between male and female participation. Vietnam is credited with having one of the highest female labor force participation rates in the world. According to the Economist, 79% of Vietnamese women aged 15 to 64 were in the labor market in 2019 (compared to 86% of men).<sup>92</sup> Timor-Leste follows Vietnam, with 61% of working-age women in the labor market (compared to 73% of men).<sup>93</sup> Thailand's female labor force participation rate is 59% (compared to 76% for men), Indonesia's is 55% (compared to 83% for men), and Myanmar's is 48% (compared to 76% for men).<sup>94</sup> The Philippines possesses the lowest female labor force participation rate, with just 46% of working-age women in the workforce (vs 72% of men).<sup>95</sup>

Disparities in the workforce are likely rooted in gender norms. Women may come under pressure to remain at home and care for family members. According to the International Labor Organization, women in Asia-Pacific region perform four times more unpaid care work than their male counterparts.<sup>96</sup> An analysis of data collected during a 2017 national survey in the Philippines revealed that household and family duties are the primary cause of women's economic inactivity. Filipino women were almost six times more likely than men to be economically inactive due to domestic responsibilities. This statistic has stayed the same since the previous survey in 2007, indicating a lack of progress in challenging gendered expectations.<sup>97</sup>



**Table 2: Female and male labor force participation rates in Southeast Asia, data from the Economist<sup>98</sup> and the World Bank.<sup>99</sup>**

## COVID-19 and Labor Force Participation

<sup>92</sup> The Economist, "Vietnam Has One of the Highest Shares of Women in Work in the World," Jun 2019, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2019/06/08/vietnam-has-one-of-the-highest-shares-of-women-in-work-in-the-world>.

<sup>93</sup> "Labor Force Participation Rate, Female – Timor-Leste, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar" World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.MA.NE.ZS?locations=TL-TH-ID-MM>

<sup>94</sup> "Labor Force Participation Rate, Female – Timor-Leste, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar" World Bank.

<sup>95</sup> The National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), "Report: Determinants of Female Labor Force Participation in the Philippines," (2019): <http://www.neda.gov.ph/new-neda-study-identifies-reasons-behind-filipino-womens-low-labor-participation-rate/>.

<sup>96</sup> ILO, "Women do 4 Times More Unpaid Care Work than Men in Asia and the Pacific," Jun 2018, [https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS\\_633284/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS_633284/lang--en/index.htm).

<sup>97</sup> Christina F. Epetia, "Explaining the Gender Gap in Labor Force Participation in the Philippines," *Japan Labor Issues*, Vol. 3, 17, 2019.

<sup>98</sup> The Economist, "Vietnam Has One of the Highest Shares of Women in Work in the World."

<sup>99</sup> "Labor Force Participation Rate, Female and Male – Timor-Leste, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar" World Bank

Women worldwide have faced steep levels of unemployment as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>100</sup> In the Asia-Pacific, women's labor force participation has dropped by 1.3% since the onset of the outbreak, compared to 1% for men.<sup>101</sup> Although the difference between these percentages is marginal, the inordinately low number of Southeast Asian women in the workforce makes any decline in their economic participation a cause for concern.

Factors that are causing women to lose their jobs more readily than men stem from the gendered division of unpaid labor and the concentration of women in sectors hardest hit by the health crisis. According to a recent UNICEF survey, women from Southeast Asia are facing intense pressure due to the triple burden of domestic responsibilities, familial care work, and paid employment, all of which have been exacerbated by the pandemic.<sup>102</sup> In addition, Southeast Asian women are more likely to be employed in uncontracted work in industries that have been severely impaired by the virus, including hospitality, essential domestic work, and manufacturing.<sup>103</sup> For instance, women constitute more than three-quarters of the garment sector in Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam,<sup>104</sup> which has experienced a dramatic downturn since the start of the health crisis. Imports from garment exporting countries in Asia fell by 70% over the first half of 2020, culminating in a significant number of layoffs.<sup>105</sup>

## **Informal Employment**

Two-thirds of informal workers in Southeast Asia are women. Informal sector work, which includes domestic and daily wage work, is often uncontracted and poorly paid. Informal sector workers are typically unable to access social security. Gender inequality is more pronounced in the shadow economy than in the formal sector because women employed in the former are concentrated at the lower end of the sector.<sup>106</sup> In addition, the unregulated nature of the work renders women vulnerable to workplace harassment and sexual exploitation.<sup>107</sup>

Women comprise the majority of informal sector workers in Myanmar, Indonesia, and Vietnam.<sup>108</sup> In the Philippines, approximately 40% of working women are employed in the

---

<sup>100</sup> BBC, "Why this recession disproportionately affects women," Oct 2020,

<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20201021-why-this-recession-disproportionately-affects-women>

<sup>101</sup> IMF, "Navigating the Pandemic: A Multispeed Recovery in Asia," (Oct 2020),

<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/APAC/Issues/2020/10/21/regional-economic-outlook-apd>

<sup>102</sup> CARE, "Rapid Gender Analysis during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Mekong Sub-Regional Report," (Sept 2020),

<https://www.unicef.org/eap/media/6871/file/Rapid%20Gender%20Analysis%20during%20COVID-19%20Pandemic.pdf>

<sup>103</sup> Julianna Lai, "COVID-19's Gender Problem in Informal Southeast Asia," *CSIS*, Aug 2020,

<https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/covid-19s-gender-problem-informal-southeast-asia>.

<sup>104</sup> ILO, "Asia-Pacific Garment and Footwear Sector Research Note" (Oct 2017), [https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/files/documents/wcms\\_581466.pdf](https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/files/documents/wcms_581466.pdf)

<sup>105</sup> ILO, "Women hit hard by COVID-19 impact on garment sector," Nov 2020, [https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS\\_761496/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS_761496/lang--en/index.htm)

<sup>106</sup> ILO, "Informal economy: a hazardous activity," [https://www.ilo.org/safework/areasofwork/hazardous-work/WCMS\\_110305/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/safework/areasofwork/hazardous-work/WCMS_110305/lang--en/index.htm)

<sup>107</sup> Lola Bertulfo, "Women and the Informal Economy: A Think Piece," (Australian Government Office of Development Effectiveness, 2011), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/women-informal-economy-lota-bertulfo.pdf>

<sup>108</sup> Lai, "COVID-19's Gender Problem in Informal Southeast Asia."

informal sector, while 74% of women in Mindanao, which contains some of the poorest provinces in the Philippines,<sup>109</sup> work in the informal economy.<sup>110</sup>

Gender pay gaps are particularly pronounced for women engaged in informal employment. In Indonesia, there is a 50% gender wage gap for informal workers.<sup>111</sup> In Timor-Leste, which has exceedingly high rates of poverty and where many rely on subsistence farming, women perform income-generating activities such as weaving and selling agricultural produce. Activities associated with women are less profitable than those carried out by men, such as cultivation and trading.<sup>112</sup> In part, this may relate to the fact that rural women in Timor-Leste are primarily responsible for unpaid work like household chores, child-rearing, collecting firewood and water, as well as food production. Just 20% of Timorese women are paid for their labor.<sup>113</sup>

### **COVID-19 and the Shadow Economy**

The pandemic has worsened circumstances for informal workers. Many have lost their jobs, are ineligible for unemployment benefits, and have little to no savings at their disposal.<sup>114</sup> Many uncontracted jobs held by women are not commutable. For instance, women from the Philippines and Indonesia formed the bulk of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. Many lost their jobs or were unable to work due to border closures, and were dismissed following the re-opening of international travel due to fears that they were carrying the virus. Individuals employed in this sector suffer greatly from the lack of social security. Only the Philippines has offered public healthcare to informal-sector employees. Myanmar enacted a scheme whereby garment sector workers who had lost their jobs during the pandemic were eligible for social security. However, this scheme only extended to registered workers, excluding an extremely large proportion of women employed in Myanmar's garment industry.<sup>115</sup>

### **Discrimination in the Workplace**

In both the informal and formal sectors, women experience high levels of workplace discrimination in Southeast Asia. Around 40% of pregnant women in ASEAN Member States reported encountering discrimination in a 2016 survey, often by being unfairly dismissed from their jobs.<sup>116</sup> Although a number of countries have passed laws that protect pregnant women from unemployment, these do not extend to informal sector workers.<sup>117</sup> Sexual harassment is also commonplace. In a 2018 survey, 57% of women employed at a

---

<sup>109</sup> The poverty incidence in Mindanao is 36%, 14% higher than the national average (22%), Asia Development Bank, "Summary Poverty Reduction and Social Strategy," <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/41076-048-sprss.pdf>

<sup>110</sup> NEDA, "Report: Determinants of Female Labor Force Participation in the Philippines."

<sup>111</sup> Monash University, "Women's Economic Participation in Indonesia," 2017, <https://www.monash.edu/business/cdes/research/publications/publications2/Womens-economic-participation-in-Indonesia-June-2017.pdf>.

<sup>112</sup> The Asia Foundation, "Women's Economic Empowerment in Timor-Leste," <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/TimorLesteWEPECON.pdf>.

<sup>113</sup> IWDA, "Timor-Leste," <https://iwda.org.au/timor-leste/>

<sup>114</sup> WEF, "COVID-19 Could Bring About a 'New Deal' for Millions of Asia's Informal Workers," May 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/informal-workers-asia-coronavirus-covid19-employment-deal>.

<sup>115</sup> Lai, "COVID-19's Gender Problem in Informal Southeast Asia."

<sup>116</sup> Pamela Victor, "Southeast Asian Women in the Workforce," *The ASEAN Post*, Nov 2020, <https://theaseanpost.com/article/southeast-asian-women-workforce>.

<sup>117</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on Indonesia."

government industrial complex in Jakarta reported being sexually harassed.<sup>118</sup> In Myanmar, over half of women report being sexually harassed at work, and 81% of victims said they did not take any formal action.<sup>119</sup> A study revealed that more than half of women employed in Vietnam's garment sector have experienced sexual harassment at work.<sup>120</sup>

## EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Responding to gender gaps in educational attainment is not a core goal of the WPS agenda. However, educational attainment is integral to achieving gender equality and is linked to greater stability. An increase in girls' education is correlated with a reduction in child marriages, lower maternal mortality rates, and better career prospects for women. In addition, narrowing gender gaps in literacy rates bolsters women's ability to access critical information regarding their rights.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, a 2005 study revealed that countries exhibiting higher female-to-male educational attainment ratios are at lower risk of intrastate conflict.<sup>122</sup> The connection between education and conflict is not fully understood, but it may relate to the positive outcomes education has for development and gender equality. By opening avenues for women to participate in the economy and politics, education can create more prosperous and peaceful societies.

### Tertiary-Level Education

Great strides have been made toward closing the gender gap in educational enrolment in Southeast Asia. In many Southeast Asian nations, women now outnumber men in tertiary-level education. In the Philippines, women account for 57% of all individuals enrolled in higher education institutions.<sup>123</sup> In Indonesia, 18% of women aged 25 to 34 hold a degree compared to 14% of men from the same age group.<sup>124</sup> A larger share of women are in post-secondary education in Vietnam (32% of women versus 26% of men).<sup>125</sup> In Thailand, women outnumber men in tertiary education, and they are more likely than their male peers to complete their degree.<sup>126</sup> In 2018, 22% of women and 16% of men were enrolled in higher education in Myanmar.<sup>127</sup> Timor-Leste is the only country in the sample where the number of women in post-secondary education is lower than men (8% of women compared to 9% of men).<sup>128</sup>

---

<sup>118</sup> The Jakarta Post, "Indonesia Remains 'Grim Place' for Working Women," Jun 2018, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/03/11/indonesia-remains-grim-place-for-working-women.html>.

<sup>119</sup> International Finance Corporation (IFC), "Increasing Opportunities for Women in Myanmar," <https://www.ifc.org/wps>

<sup>120</sup> CARE, "Rapid Gender Analysis during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Mekong Sub-Regional Report."

<sup>121</sup> Azza Karam, "Education as the Pathway Towards Gender Equality," UN, <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/education-pathway-towards-gender-equality>

<sup>122</sup> Erik Melander, "Gender Equality and Intrastate Armed Conflict," *International Studies Quarterly*, 49(4), 2005.

<sup>123</sup> WEF, "The Global Gender Gap Report 2020."

<sup>124</sup> OECD, "Education at a Glance 2019," [https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/EAG2019\\_CN\\_IDN.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/EAG2019_CN_IDN.pdf).

<sup>125</sup> WEF, "The Global Gender Gap Report 2020."

<sup>126</sup> Public Governance Directorate, "Thailand: Gender Budgeting Action Plan," (OECD, 2019): <http://www.oecd.org/gov/budgeting/gender-budgeting-action-plan-thailand.pdf>.

<sup>127</sup> "School Enrolment, Tertiary, Female (% Gross) – Myanmar," World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR.FE?locations=MM>.

<sup>128</sup> UNICEF and UNFPA, "Timor-Leste Population and Housing Census 2015: Education Monograph 2017," (UN, 2017): [https://www.unicef.org/timorleste/media/2211/file/Education%20Monograph%20250418\\_0.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/timorleste/media/2211/file/Education%20Monograph%20250418_0.pdf).



## Primary and Secondary-Level Education

The majority of countries in the sample have achieved gender parity in literacy rates and primary and secondary level enrollment. In the Philippines, 93% of boys and girls are in primary education, and the literacy rate is approximately 98% for both women and men. However, more girls in the country (71%) than boys (61%) reach secondary-level education.<sup>129</sup> Similarly, in Myanmar, a larger share of girls receive secondary-level tuition than boys (67% versus 62% boys).<sup>130</sup> This trend also extends to Thailand, where 78% of girls and 77% of boys enter secondary-level education.<sup>131</sup> There is a slight gender imbalance in Indonesia, with 91% of girls compared to 96% of boys in elementary education. However, the number of Indonesian children attending school remains extremely high and is rising for both sexes. In Vietnam, literacy rates are roughly equal among both men and women—94% of women and 95% of men are literate.<sup>132</sup> Though rates of education are generally low throughout Timor-Leste, there is little gender disparity in educational attainment. According to a 2015 census, 50% of girls and boys are enrolled in primary education and 15% in secondary.<sup>133</sup>

## Education, Poverty, and Instability

Despite major progress in women's educational attainment, there are multiple barriers to advancing education throughout the region. In rural, disadvantaged, and conflict-affected areas, girls, as well as boys, are unable to access adequate schooling. In Timor-Leste, where 42% of the population live below the national poverty line,<sup>134</sup> levels of education remain low—in 2015, almost 37% of Timor-Leste's rural youth are illiterate.<sup>135</sup> Rates of illiteracy are also relatively high among women. The OECD estimates that just 48% of Timorese women aged 15 and above can read and write.<sup>136</sup> Women and girls from marginalized ethnic groups in Vietnam, who reside in some of the poorest provinces in the country, also struggle to obtain sufficient education.<sup>137</sup>

In conflict-affected areas like Rakhine State in Myanmar, girls face significant barriers in obtaining education. There is a pronounced gender literacy gap in Myanmar's Rakhine State, where 92% of men are literate compared to 79% of women.<sup>138</sup> Boys in Rakhine are three times more likely to receive secondary education than girls.<sup>139</sup> In part, this gap stems from a difference in gendered expectations—boys generally remain in school after reaching adolescence, while girls start being withdrawn from the age of 10 to assist women in their

---

<sup>129</sup> Matthew Reysio-Cruz, "More Women in HS, College than Men in PH, Says Report," *CDN*, Dec 2019, <https://cebudailynews.inquirer.net/277624/more-women-in-hs-college-than-men-in-ph-says-report>.

<sup>130</sup> "School Enrolment, Secondary, Female (% Net) – Myanmar," World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.NENR.FE?locations=MM>.

<sup>131</sup> "School Enrolment, Secondary, Female (% Net) – Thailand," World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/Thailand>.

<sup>132</sup> WEF, "The Global Gender Gap Report 2020."

<sup>133</sup> UNICEF and UNFPA, "Timor-Leste Population and Housing Census 2015."

<sup>134</sup> IWDA, "Timor-Leste," <https://iwda.org.au/timor-leste/>

<sup>135</sup> UNICEF and UNFPA, "Timor-Leste Population and Housing Census 2015."

<sup>136</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on Timor-Leste."

<sup>137</sup> Emma Martin, "Girls' Education in Vietnam," *Borgen Project*, May 2018, <https://borgenproject.org/girls-education-in-vietnam/>.

<sup>138</sup> Peninah Kimiri et al., "CARE Rapid Gender Analysis Myanmar – Rakhine State," (UN Women/ CARE, 2020): [https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/images/GiE\\_Learning\\_RGA\\_Myanmar-Rakhine-State\\_COVID-19\\_August2020.pdf](https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/images/GiE_Learning_RGA_Myanmar-Rakhine-State_COVID-19_August2020.pdf).

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

households with domestic tasks. However, withdrawing girls from school can also relate to physical insecurity—parents in Rakhine sometimes remove their daughters from education and marry them off because they believe their daughters will be safer if they remain in a domestic environment.<sup>140</sup> A 2019 survey of several conflict-affected States in Myanmar found that the leading factors preventing girls from receiving education related to concerns over physical security, both in traveling to school and while at the school itself.<sup>141</sup>

Mindanao and its surrounding provinces contain the highest number of out-of-school children in the Philippines. In 2018, 10% of girls and 14% of boys in Mindanao were not enrolled in school.<sup>142</sup> These figures, alongside others from the Philippines, reveal that boys face more obstacles to receiving education than girls. David et al. believe sons from poor backgrounds are taken out of school earlier than girls because Filipino boys are able to earn money at a younger age.<sup>143</sup>

### **Gender Prejudice in Education**

School curricula and textbooks are riddled with gender stereotypes. Scholars believe that the promotion of traditional gender roles in schools explains why parity in enrollment has not paved the way to greater female participation in the workforce.<sup>144</sup> Southeast Asian textbooks have been known to propagate gender stereotypes. The Thai government was criticized for allowing schools to use textbooks that portray women as wives and men as leaders.<sup>145</sup> In Myanmar, traditional gender roles are taught to girls "as soon as they start school." Textbooks from the country use images of women to illustrate verbs like cooking and cleaning, while pictures of men are shown alongside activities like sports and farming.<sup>146</sup>

### **GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**

Almost all security resolutions in the WPS framework focus on protecting women and girls—and more recently men and boys<sup>147</sup>—from wartime GBV. Violence against women and girls is a global phenomenon that can be explained by the "continuum of violence," a term coined by feminist scholars to describe the linkages between gendered harms committed in public and private. This continuum is fueled by inequalities that are rooted in patriarchal norms and widespread misogyny. As discussed, GBV is also closely connected to war. Violence against women and girls intensifies during conflict and, in turn, has the propensity to exacerbate tensions that drive conflict.<sup>148</sup>

---

<sup>140</sup> Peninah Kimiri et al

<sup>141</sup> Park and Pelletier, "Gender, Violence and Ethnic Conflict in Myanmar."

<sup>142</sup> Clarissa C. David et al., "Boys Are Still Left Behind in Basic Education," *Philippine Institute for Development Studies*, Dec 2018, <https://pidswebs.pids.gov.ph/CDN/PUBLICATIONS/pidspn1820.pdf>.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Rebecca Crisp and Asha Clementi, "Reality or Rhetoric: Understanding Gender Inequality and Education in Myanmar," *International Affairs*, Jul 2020, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au>.

<sup>145</sup> Emma Martin, "Ten Extremely Important Facts About Girls' Education in Thailand," *The Borgen Project*, Jul 2018, <https://borgenproject.org/facts-about-girls-education-in-thailand/>.

<sup>146</sup> Crisp and Clementi, "Reality or Rhetoric."

<sup>147</sup> Securitywomen, "Exclusive Interview with UNSCR 1325 at NATO HQ Celebrating her 19th Birthday," Oct 2019, <https://www.securitywomen.org/post/exclusive-interview-with-unscr-1325-at-nato-hq-celebrating-her-19th-birthday>

<sup>148</sup> Herbert, "Links Between Women's Empowerment (or lack of) and Outbreaks of Violent Conflict."

## Legal Frameworks

All countries in the sample have ratified the UN's Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and some are party to regional frameworks that seek to prevent violence against women. The Philippines, Vietnam, and Thailand entered into ASEAN's 2015 RPA on EVAW.

Both the Philippines and Timor-Leste have developed legal blueprints that seek to prevent all forms of GBV. The Philippines established a comprehensive legal framework for the elimination of all forms of violence against women. Introduced in 2009, the Magna Carta for Women (MCW) is a legal document that ordered government agencies to mainstream gender in policies and budgets, and called for the protection of women and girls from physical, sexual, emotional, and economic violence. Five years before launching the MCW, the Philippine legislature passed the Anti-Violence Against Women and Children Act (2004). The Act demanded that law enforcement investigate all perpetrators of Violence Against Women (VAW) and provide adequate assistance to survivors.<sup>149</sup> Timor-Leste introduced two consecutive national action plans for eliminating gender-based violence (for the periods 2012-2016 and 2017-2021). The NAP-GBV serves as a guide for the government to prevent and respond to GBV. Timor-Leste also legally defined and criminalized domestic violence in 2010.<sup>150</sup>

Other countries have not yet formulated overarching legal frameworks on GBV, but have enacted legislation to address specific forms of gendered violence. Indonesia adopted the Elimination of Domestic Violence Law in 2004 and the Witness Protection Act in 2006. The latter intends to safeguard survivors of domestic violence.<sup>151</sup> Thailand introduced the Domestic Violence Victim Protection Act of 2007 and the Anti-Trafficking Act (2008), which criminalized domestic violence and human trafficking.<sup>152</sup> Myanmar's NSPAW includes a commitment to developing policies that prevent GBV. Myanmar also brought in anti-trafficking legislation in 2005.<sup>153</sup> Vietnam has enacted a succession of laws addressing GBV, including the 2006 Law on Gender Equality that prohibits GBV, the 2007 Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control, and the 2011 anti-trafficking law.<sup>154</sup>

## Sexual Violence

The countries in this sample have unanimously criminalized rape. However, there are major difficulties in preventing its occurrence due to flaws in the legal system and cultural attitudes toward rape. In Thailand, women who have been the victims of sexual violence are legally only able to speak to female police officers. As a result, the dearth of women police officers in Thailand exacerbates the phenomenal rate of unreported cases in the country (estimated to be 90%).<sup>155</sup>

---

<sup>149</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on The Philippines," 2019, <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/PH.pdf>

<sup>150</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on Timor-Leste."

<sup>151</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on Indonesia."

<sup>152</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on Thailand," 2019, <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/TH.pdf>

<sup>153</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on Myanmar," 2019, <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/MM.pdf>

<sup>154</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on Vietnam."

<sup>155</sup> Fullerton, "Thai Police Academy Bans Women from Enrolling."

Though sexual assault is a prosecutable offense in Vietnam, no laws explicitly criminalize marital rape.<sup>156</sup> This is problematic since spousal sexual assault is on the rise. A national study published by the Vietnamese government in 2020 shows that sexual violence within relationships has grown by over 3% in the past decade. 10% of women reported experiencing sexual assault at the hands of their partners in 2010, compared to 13.3% in 2020.<sup>157</sup>

Various legal tools are available to survivors of sexual violence in Timor-Leste. However, family members discourage survivors from using nontraditional means of justice (i.e., formal law enforcement bodies as opposed to religious and ancestral methods of justice), resulting in inadequate punishment for perpetrators and exacerbating rates of unreported cases.<sup>158</sup> Societal attitudes and social stigma are also at play. A 2015 survey found that 86% of Timorese women who had experienced sexual and/or physical violence did not seek assistance, the vast majority of whom felt too ashamed to approach authorities.<sup>159</sup>

## Domestic Violence

Myanmar is yet to introduce a law that exclusively addresses domestic violence. Currently, IPV is only punishable under the broader crime of physical assault.<sup>160</sup> The absence of a legal framework is at odds with the staggeringly high rate of IPV in Myanmar. Approximately 20% of Myanmar women experienced domestic violence over the course of a single year (2015—2016).<sup>161</sup> Other research found that half of all women and men in Myanmar deem the use of physical violence against a wife acceptable "under certain circumstances."<sup>162</sup>

It is difficult for women to initiate divorce in a number of states and some judicial bodies discount physical abuse as grounds for marriage termination. The widespread practice of Catholicism in the Philippines makes divorce a contentious issue. Philippine citizens are entitled to legal separation or annulment but are unable to file for divorce. Spousal violence is regarded as justification for separation but not annulment.<sup>163</sup> A 2017 National Health survey found that an estimated one in four Filipino women will experience IPV.<sup>164</sup> The survey results imply that around 13 million women in the Philippines are likely to encounter domestic violence at some point in their lives, many of whom will be forced to remain legally married to their abuser under these laws.

Under Indonesian law, men and women are free to initiate divorce and domestic violence is considered grounds for marriage termination. In reality, it is far easier for men to divorce their wives than *vice versa*. The husband is the only party able to submit a dissolution request

---

<sup>156</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on Vietnam."

<sup>157</sup> UNFPA, "Viet Nam Releases Landmark Follow-Up Study on Violence Against Women," Aug 2020, <https://www.unfpa.org/news/viet-nam-releases-landmark-follow-study-violence-against-women>.

<sup>158</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on Timor-Leste."

<sup>159</sup> The Asia Foundation, "Ending Violence Against Women and Children in Timor-Leste," 2019, <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content>

<sup>160</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on Myanmar."

<sup>161</sup> Aye Thiri Kyaw, "Violence Against Women: A Blow to 'Gender Equality' Myth in Myanmar," *LSE*, Dec 2019, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/socialpolicy/2019/12/19/violence-against-women-a-blow-to-gender-equality-myth-in-myanmar/>.

<sup>162</sup> Aye Thiri Kyaw, "Violence Against Women: A Blow to 'Gender Equality' Myth in Myanmar."

<sup>163</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on The Philippines."

<sup>164</sup> Sofia Tomacruz, "Violence Against Women an 'Epidemic' in PH – Expert," *Rappler*, Mar 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/expert-violence-against-women-epidemic-philippines>.

to a religious court to legally end an Islamic marriage in Indonesia. Judges at religious courts are often reluctant to grant a divorce on the basis of physical assault.<sup>165</sup> A 2018 study revealed that most cases of GBV in Indonesia occur in the home.<sup>166</sup> Curtailing women's rights to divorce means that millions of Indonesian women will be incapable of fleeing violent marriages.

In Timor-Leste, both women and men can initiate a divorce. However, divorce can only be pronounced if married parties provide proof of a "violation of conjugal obligations." This legal stipulation prevents many women in abusive marriages from divorcing their spouses for fear of humiliation and because they are unable to pay legal fees.<sup>167</sup> An estimated 60% of women in Timor-Leste experience IPV.<sup>168</sup> As such, any obstacles that women face in initiating formal divorce proceedings will have a detrimental impact on their physical security and mental health.

### **Child Marriage**

Governments in Southeast Asia have passed legislation to prevent child marriage. All states examined here have minimum marriageable ages ranging from 17 to 20, which generally apply irrespective of gender. However, in many countries, age restrictions only apply in the absence of parental consent and girls routinely marry before they reach the age of majority. In Indonesia, with parental permission, girls can marry at 16 and boys at 19. The three-year age difference has been described as "fundamentally unfair," and is viewed as paving the way to early marriage among girls.<sup>169</sup> According to UNICEF, 14% of girls in Indonesia are wed before reaching 18.<sup>170</sup>

In Thailand, the minimum marriageable age is set at 17 for both sexes. However, this does not apply in cases where parents or guardians give their consent.<sup>171</sup> In a decision hailed as a breakthrough in the fight against child marriage, the Central Islamic Council of Thailand banned mosques from marrying any individual under the age of 17 in 2018. However, no penalties are in place for violators. After Lao, Thailand leads ASEAN Member-States in having the highest rate of underage marriages—approximately 4% of girls are married by age 15 and 23% by age 18.<sup>172</sup>

In the Philippines, the minimum marriageable age is 18, and the MCW affirms that any marriage with a minor will not be legally recognized. However, there are no legal sanctions for underage marriage. Moreover, the 1977 Code of Muslim Personal Laws of the Philippines, which governs the Bangsamoro region, allows boys to marry at 15, and girls "after they have

---

<sup>165</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on Indonesia."

<sup>166</sup> Kate Lamb, "Indonesian Women Suffering 'Epidemic' of Domestic Violence, Activists Warn," *Guardian*, Jul 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/jul/18/indonesian-women-suffering-epidemic-of-domestic-violence-activists-warn>.

<sup>167</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on Timor-Leste."

<sup>168</sup> Asia Foundation, "Ending Violence Against Women Timor-Leste."

<sup>169</sup> Bhardwaj and Dunstan (2019). *Women are Transforming Indonesia*.

<sup>170</sup> The ASEAN Post, "How to Buy a Thai Child Bride," Apr 2019, <https://theaseanpost.com/article/how-buy-thai-child-bride>.

<sup>171</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on Thailand."

<sup>172</sup> The ASEAN Post, "How to Buy a Thai Child Bride."

reached puberty," meaning that some girls enter marriages at age 12.<sup>173</sup> A 2020 study by Oxfam found that around a quarter of girls from Mindanao marry before they reach 18.<sup>174</sup>

### **Female Genital Mutilation**

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is not widely practiced in Southeast Asia. However, no laws exist to prevent FGM where it is known to take place such as Thailand and the Philippines.<sup>175</sup> In 2015, *al Jazeera* interviewed a doctor who regularly performs FGM on girls in southern Thailand. The doctor said she carried out between 10 and 20 procedures a week, and that the custom is commonplace in Thailand's southern provinces.<sup>176</sup>

Indonesian authorities banned FGM in 2006 but overturned the decision in 2010, ruling that only doctors or medical practitioners can legally carry out the procedure.<sup>177</sup> It was not until 2016 that the scale of FGM in the country was exposed, when a study found that almost half of all Indonesian girls under the age of 11 had undergone FGM.<sup>178</sup> Recent figures place Indonesia among the top three countries globally for the prevalence of FGM.<sup>179</sup>

### **Sexual Harassment**

Some Southeast Asian countries, including Timor-Leste, Myanmar, and Vietnam have criminalized sexual harassment and enshrined its definition in law. However, others, such as Thailand and Indonesia, have yet to enact any sexual harassment laws.<sup>180</sup> The absence of legal measures in Indonesia is troubling considering around 60% of Indonesian women reported experiencing sexual harassment in a recent survey.<sup>181</sup> Online sexual harassment is also a common occurrence in Indonesia. Indonesia's National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) reported a more than 50% increase in reported cases of online sexual harassment and abuse in 2020 compared to the previous year.<sup>182</sup>

---

<sup>173</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on The Philippines."

<sup>174</sup> Oxfam, "Taking Space: A Snapshot of Child, Early, and Force Marriage – Insights from Oxfam and Partners' Work in the Philippines," 2020, <https://philippines.oxfam.org/latest/policy-paper/taking-space-snapshot-child-early-and-forced-marriage-insights-oxfam>.

<sup>175</sup> OECD, "Gender Index."

<sup>176</sup> Gabrielle Paluch, "Female Genital Cutting in Thailand's South," *Al Jazeera*, Apr 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/04/02/female-genital-cutting-in-thailands-south/>.

<sup>177</sup> OECD, "Gender Index on Indonesia."

<sup>178</sup> Beh Lih Yi, "Indonesia Launches New Campaign to End Female Genital Mutilation: Minister," *Reuters*, Sep 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-women-fgm-idUSKCN11R25Q>

<sup>179</sup> Suahyo, "Study: Indonesians Embrace FGM."

<sup>180</sup> OECD, "Gender Index."

<sup>181</sup> Lamb, "Indonesian Women Suffering 'Epidemic' of Domestic Violence."

<sup>182</sup> Nina A. Loasana, "Online sexual abuse has more than doubled during pandemic," *Jakarta Post*, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/11/25/online-sexual-abuse-has-more-than-doubled-during-pandemic.html>

Country	Framework on GBV	Sexual Violence	Domestic Violence	Child Marriage	FGM	Sexual Harassment
Timor-Leste	Y	Y	Y	Y	NP	Y
Philippines	Y	Y	Y	Y*	N	Y
Indonesia	N	Y	Y*	Y*	N	N
Thailand	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N
Viet Nam	N	Y	Y	Y	NP	Y
Myanmar	N	Y	N	Y	NP	Y

Table 3: GBV laws enacted by countries in sample (Y: laws in place; N: no laws in place; Y\*: law in place, but exceptions allowed; NP: not known to occur/not practiced)

### COVID-19 and Gender-Based Violence

The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to a sharp rise in domestic violence globally. Domestic violence hotlines from countries in the Asia-Pacific, such as Indonesia and Myanmar, have reported a significant increase in call volumes since the onset of the pandemic.<sup>183</sup> National lockdowns have prevented domestic violence victims from fleeing abusive situations. Meanwhile, socioeconomic stressors generated by the pandemic have fueled abusive behavior. The strain on health systems and the closure of shelters due to virus-related restrictions have compounded the uptick in domestic violence, making it difficult for survivors to access vital care and assistance.<sup>184</sup> Child marriage is also believed to have increased in the region due to school closures and the economic downturn, which has placed greater financial burden on parents.<sup>185</sup>

### SUMMARY

There have been some positive developments for gender equality in Southeast Asia since the start of the millennium. Women's political representation has gradually increased in recent years, and women have attained distinguished political roles. Timor-Leste performed especially well when it comes to women's political participation, with women citizens acquiring ministerial roles that are commonly reserved for men. Moreover, ASEAN Member-States are global leaders when it comes to women's representation in senior managerial roles. In addition, all countries in the sample have reached gender parity in school enrolment, with women now outnumbering men in many tertiary-level institutions. Finally, all states have adopted various forms of anti-VAW legislation.

However, progress has been neither uniform nor linear. Women continue to be severely underrepresented in parliamentary and ministerial roles in Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, and the Philippine Cabinet contains considerably fewer women than it did two years ago. Advancements in corporate leadership belie the reality of women's economic empowerment in Southeast Asia—regional female labor force participation rates are low, more women than

<sup>183</sup> UNESCAP, “The COVID -19 Pandemic and Violence Against Women in Asia and the Pacific,” (2020), [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/20201119\\_SDD\\_Policy\\_Paper\\_COVID-19.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/20201119_SDD_Policy_Paper_COVID-19.pdf)[https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/20201119\\_SDD\\_Policy\\_Paper\\_COVID-19.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/20201119_SDD_Policy_Paper_COVID-19.pdf)

<sup>184</sup> UNESCAP, “The COVID -19 Pandemic and Violence Against Women in Asia and the Pacific.”

<sup>185</sup> UNESCAP, “The COVID -19 Pandemic and Violence Against Women in Asia and the Pacific.”

men are engaged in precarious informal-sector work, and workplace discrimination is rampant. Although there has been progress in female school enrolment, educational standards are low in poverty-stricken and conflict-affected areas, and literacy rates are often higher among men than women in these environments. In addition, traditional gender roles and stereotypes are frequently promoted within schools. Violence against women and girls is prevalent across the region and legal frameworks do not provide adequate protection from GBV. In sum, women's rights must be realized at all levels of politics, the economy, and society for gender equality to be fully achieved.

## **WPS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

This paper now turns to the localization of UNSCR 1325 in these nations. This section reviews which Southeast Asian nations have adopted National Action Plans (NAPs)—legal documents that provide a set of domestic and/or foreign policies to advance the implementation of WPS at the national level.<sup>186</sup> The section also explores efforts by ASEAN to develop a Regional Plan of Action (RPA) on WPS. It highlights the critical role that women's groups play in peacebuilding, and analyzes the extent to which women have been made a part of formal mediation efforts. Finally, it investigates women's participation in national security institutions.

## **NATIONAL AND REGIONAL COMMITMENTS TO UNSCR 1325**

### **The Philippines**

The Philippines was the first country in Asia to adopt a WPS National Action Plan in 2010. The current NAP is in place for 2017-2022. The Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process is responsible for implementation of the current NAP, which aims to consolidate and build on gains made under the first (2010-2016) NAP.<sup>187</sup> Its main goals are to protect women and girls amid armed conflict and in the face of extremist violence, and to enhance women's leadership in devising and implementing mediation efforts and preventing/countering violent extremism strategies. It seeks to empower women as leaders in both formal and informal settings (e.g. as civil society actors).

Numerous CSOs helped formulate the plan.<sup>188</sup> On the LSE-University of Sydney WPS NAP database—a comprehensive collection of WPS NAPs adopted globally—the Philippines received a ranking of 2 out of 3 for CSO involvement. This score indicates that CSOs "were given the opportunity to provide meaningful input" in drafting the plan, either through a Working Group or similar body. The NAP received a score of 1 out of 3 for its level of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) specification, revealing that the plan included "a basic M&E framework" but lacked "measurable indicators for successful implementation." The plan scored 0 out of 3 for its budget specification, meaning that its text did not refer to or acknowledge a budget.<sup>189</sup> The preceding NAP scored higher on the database—2/3 for CSO

---

<sup>186</sup> NATO, "Concepts and Definitions: Women, Peace and Security in NATO," (Office of NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for Women, Peace and Security, 2014), [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2019\\_07/20190709\\_1907-wps-glossary.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_07/20190709_1907-wps-glossary.pdf).

<sup>187</sup> Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process. National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2017-2022, [https://gnwp.org/wp-content/uploads/Philippines\\_20172022NAP.pdf](https://gnwp.org/wp-content/uploads/Philippines_20172022NAP.pdf)

<sup>188</sup> "National Action Plan: Philippines," PeaceWomen, <http://peacewomen.org/nap-philippines>.

<sup>189</sup> Hamilton, Caitlin and Laura J. Shepherd (2020) WPS National Action Plans: Content Analysis and Data Visualisation, v2. Online, at <https://www.wpsnaps.org/>



involvement, 1/3 for budget specification, and 3/3 for M&E planning.<sup>190</sup> The differences in these ratings coincide with criticisms that the current NAP is not as effective as the previous plan.<sup>191</sup>

The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), an autonomous region affected by conflict in the Southern Philippines, also adopted a regional action plan for 2020-2022. The plan, spearheaded by the Bangsamoro Women Commission, aims to safeguard women in Mindanao and enhance their participation in politics and post-conflict state building.<sup>192</sup>

## **Timor-Leste**

The secretary of State for security in Timor-Leste introduced a NAP for 2016–2020. The NAP acknowledges that over two decades of armed conflict with Indonesia caused patriarchal values to become deeply ingrained in Timorese society. The NAP attributes this culture to 24 years of militarization, which allowed men to secure and remain in influential positions in Timorese politics. The NAP anchors its vision in dismantling patriarchal structures by addressing high rates of GBV and improving women's participation at all levels of decision-making, including in central and local government.<sup>193</sup> The NAP offers recommendations for reviewing and amending laws that prevent women from playing meaningful roles in post-conflict state building.<sup>194</sup>

Timor-Leste's NAP achieved the highest scores on the LSE-University of Sydney WPS NAP database when compared to the Philippines and Indonesia. It received a score of 3 out of 3 for CSO involvement, which indicates that CSOs had the greatest level of involvement possible and co-drafted the plan.<sup>195</sup> Peacewomen writes that numerous women's groups helped devise the plan and were mandated to monitor its implementation.<sup>196</sup> Timor-Leste's plan also obtained the highest score (3/3) for its M&E specification, which means it had a "comprehensive M&E framework" including "objectives, activities, and measurable indicators." However, for budget specification it only scored 1 out of 3, signifying that it "acknowledged the need for a budget" but did not allocate funding for implementing plan commitments.<sup>197</sup>

---

<sup>190</sup> Hamilton, Caitlin and Laura J. Shepherd (2020) WPS National Action Plans: Content Analysis and Data Visualisation.

<sup>191</sup> "ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security," ASEAN, 2021.

<sup>192</sup> Bureau of Public Information-BARMM, "BWC Launches Bangsamoro Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security," *Philippine Information Agency*, Nov 2020, <https://pia.gov.ph/news/articles/1057942>.

<sup>193</sup> Government of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, "National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2016-2020)," <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/Timor-Leste-NAP-2016-2020.pdf>.

<sup>194</sup> "2016-2020 National Action Plan: Timor Leste," PeaceWomen, <https://www.peacewomen.org/resource/2016-2020-national-action-plan-timor-leste-0>.

<sup>195</sup> Hamilton, Caitlin and Laura J. Shepherd (2020) WPS National Action Plans: Content Analysis and Data Visualisation.

<sup>196</sup> "2016-2020 National Action Plan: Timor Leste," PeaceWomen, <https://www.peacewomen.org/resource/2016-2020-national-action-plan-timor-leste-0>.

<sup>197</sup> Hamilton, Caitlin and Laura J. Shepherd (2020) WPS National Action Plans: Content Analysis and Data Visualisation.

## Indonesia

In 2014, Indonesia adopted the "National Action Plans for the Protection and Empowerment of Women and Children during Social Conflicts in 2014-2019" (RAN P3A-KS). RAN P3A-KS is intended to guide government agencies to protect and empower women and children amid social and communal conflict. The plan's main objective is to bolster data collection and monitoring processes for women and children in conflict areas and rates of GBV within those areas.<sup>198</sup>

RAN P3A-KS had the lowest level of CSO involvement according to the LSE-Sydney WPS NAP database (0 out of 3). Its text made no reference to civil society actors in devising or implementing the plan. It scored 1 out of 3 for its budget specification, meaning that it acknowledged the need for a budget, but did not allocate funding. It scored 2 out of 3 for its M&E specification, suggesting that it contains a "solid M&E framework" featuring "objectives, activities, and responsible parties."<sup>199</sup>

A major criticism of RAN P3A-KS was that it centered on social (rather than armed) conflicts and did not integrate all major WPS principles, giving it limited reach.<sup>200</sup> The criticism that it failed to incorporate all four pillars of the WPS agenda is supported by a textual analysis of RAN P3A-KS, which revealed that "protection" was used 66 times, whereas "participation" only appeared 9 times.<sup>201</sup> The emphasis on protection and victimhood in Indonesia's NAP is problematic because it plays into the idea that women are solely the victims of conflict, rather than agents for change.<sup>202</sup> In this way, the NAP undermines the understanding that women do, can, and should be active participants in shaping policies and upholding peace and security, which may explain the limited attention to women's participation.

Indonesia has been working since 2019 to develop a second UNSCR 1325 plan that will be in place until 2024. The government invited civil society members and policymakers to participate in a major cross-sectoral dialogue in the summer 2020. The dialogue reviewed the previous plan and created a series of policy recommendations for the new NAP.<sup>203</sup>

## Thailand

Thailand has not adopted a WPS NAP. Instead, the Thai government has merged WPS principles with Sustainable Development Goals. The government also worked with UN Women to develop guidelines for the Thai ministries of Justice, Human Security and Social Development, and Foreign Affairs in implementing WPS objectives. Additional WPS-related mechanisms include the Coordination Center for Children and Women in the Southern Border Provinces (CCWC-SBP). The CCWC-SBP, which was established by the Thai government in partnership with the UN, works with local CSOs in Thailand's southern

---

<sup>198</sup> "National Action Plan: Indonesia," PeaceWomen, <http://peacewomen.org/action-plan>

<sup>199</sup> Hamilton, Caitlin and Laura J. Shepherd (2020) WPS National Action Plans: Content Analysis and Data Visualisation, v2. Online, at <https://www.wpsnaps.org/>

<sup>200</sup> "ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security," ASEAN, 2021, [https://asean.org/?static\\_post=asean-regional-study-women-peace-security](https://asean.org/?static_post=asean-regional-study-women-peace-security)

<sup>201</sup> Hamilton, Caitlin and Laura J. Shepherd (2020) WPS National Action Plans: Content Analysis and Data Visualisation, v2. Online, at <https://www.wpsnaps.org/>

<sup>202</sup> Roxani Krystalli, "Women, Peace, and Victimhood," Global Observatory, Oct 2020, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2020/10/women-peace-and-victimhood/>

<sup>203</sup> "ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security," ASEAN, 2021, [https://asean.org/?static\\_post=asean-regional-study-women-peace-security](https://asean.org/?static_post=asean-regional-study-women-peace-security)

conflict to promote women's inclusion in peacebuilding. CCWC-SBP has its own action plan and accompanying budget. The primary focus of the CCWC-SBP plan is to empower women through capacity-building and the elimination of GBV.<sup>204</sup>

## Myanmar

Myanmar is yet to introduce a NAP. However, it has developed the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013-2022 (NSPAW). The plan aims to alleviate gender inequality in several key areas, including in the economy and education.<sup>205</sup> Importantly, the NSPAW is intended to safeguard women during armed conflict. Since 2017, various official bodies, including the Department of Social Welfare, state governments, and the Myanmar National Committee on Women, have collaborated with UN Women and the Norwegian Embassy in Yangon to execute a project entitled, "Centering Women and their Priorities in the Peace Process: Implementing the UNSCR 1325 and Related Resolutions." The project was devised to assist the implementation of WPS-related commitments contained in the NSPAW in conflict-affected states.<sup>206</sup> However, the ASEAN regional study into WPS in Southeast Asia emphasized that discussions concerning WPS in Myanmar were often set in motion by women parliamentarians, particularly during the 2019 constitutional reform process.<sup>207</sup> As such, Myanmar's February military coup casts uncertainty on the implementation of WPS-related commitments in the country.

## Vietnam

Vietnam has not yet introduced a NAP. However, its constitution contains a commitment to advancing gender equality that overlaps with the WPS participation pillar. In 2013, the Vietnamese government amended Article 26 of its constitution. The article states that women and men have equal rights in all fields, and that the state is responsible for guaranteeing this right. It also says that "The State, society, and family shall create the conditions for women to develop comprehensively and to advance their role in society."<sup>208</sup>

---

<sup>204</sup> "ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security," ASEAN, 2021, [https://asean.org/?static\\_post=asean-regional-study-women-peace-security](https://asean.org/?static_post=asean-regional-study-women-peace-security)

<sup>205</sup> "National Strategic Plan for The Advancement of Women (NSPAW)," Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process, <https://www.agipp.org/en/issues/thataffectwomenspart/national-strategic-plan-advancement-women>.

<sup>206</sup> UN Women, "Centering Women and Their Priorities in Myanmar Peace Process: Implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and Related Resolutions – Phase II," *Mohinga*, 2019, <https://mohinga.info/en/profiles/activity/411124-0773/>.

<sup>207</sup> "ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security," ASEAN, 2021, [https://asean.org/?static\\_post=asean-regional-study-women-peace-security](https://asean.org/?static_post=asean-regional-study-women-peace-security)

<sup>208</sup> "ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security," ASEAN, 2021. P. 52.

Country	Plan	CSO	Budget	M&E	Total
<b>T-L</b>	NAP 2016-2020	3	1	3	7
<b>PH</b>	NAP WPS 2017-2022	2	0	1	3
<b>IND</b>	RAN P3A-KS 2014-2019	0	1	2	3
<b>THAI</b>	None				
<b>VN</b>	None				
<b>MM</b>	None				

Table 4: NAPs ranked according to the LSE/University of Sydney NAPs database.<sup>209</sup>

## ASEAN

### *WPS-Related Activities in ASEAN*

Though ASEAN has not established a Regional Plan of Action (RPA), it has explored avenues for implementing WPS objectives throughout the region and it initiated consultations regarding the development of a RPA earlier in 2021. One important advancement has been the Joint Statement on Promoting WPS in ASEAN, which was adopted at the 31st ASEAN Summit in Manila, Philippines in 2017. The Joint Statement is ASEAN's closest thing to a consensus document on UNSCR 1325. The Statement affirms that the participation of women in peace and security is integral to regional stability. It calls for increasing women's participation in political, judicial, and security sectors, and in peace processes. It calls on states to deploy women as negotiators, mediators, and first responders during armed conflict and in the face of extremist violence. In 2019, ASEAN organized an "inaugural intersectoral dialogue on WPS issues in the ASEAN region" to assist Member States in their implementation of the Joint Statement.<sup>210</sup> In August 2019, ASEAN convened its first Symposium on Women, Peace and Security. Representatives from various sectors were invited to the Symposium, where they discussed measures for advancing the WPS agenda at national and regional levels.<sup>211</sup>

Other developments worth highlighting include the ASEAN panel, "The Role of Women Mediators in the Maintenance of Regional Peace and Security," which took place in July 2020. Backed by Indonesia, the panel was part of a broader effort to establish the Southeast Asia

<sup>209</sup> Hamilton, Caitlin and Laura J. Shepherd (2020) WPS National Action Plans: Content Analysis and Data Visualisation, v2. Online, at <https://www.wpsnaps.org/>

<sup>210</sup> Noleen Heyzer, "ASEAN'S Transformative Journey: Role of Women in Peace and Security," *RSIS*, Sep 2019, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/aseans-transformative-journey-role-of-women-in-peace-and-security/#.X67IU3j7RIY>

<sup>211</sup> U.S. Mission to ASEAN, "Regional Symposium on Implementing Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in ASEAN," 2019, <https://asean.usmission.gov/regional-symposium-on-implementing-women-peace-and-security-wps-agenda-in-asean/>.

Network of Women Peace Mediators. It focused on emerging WPS issues in Southeast Asia and the role of women mediators in peace processes.<sup>212</sup> In September 2020, Vietnam, as the acting chair of ASEAN, organized the "ASEAN Ministerial Dialogue on Strengthening Women's Role for Sustainable Peace and Security." The Dialogue drew attention to the status of WPS in the region and policies for cultivating women's empowerment and gender equality.<sup>213</sup> In March 2021, to celebrate International Women's Day, ASEAN published a groundbreaking new study on the implementation of the WPS agenda in ASEAN. The study, created in collaboration with UN Women and the U.S. Agency for International Development, provided in-depth policy recommendations for ASEAN member-states to accelerate the implementation of UNSCR 1325 across the region.<sup>214</sup> Following release of this study in March 2021, ASEAN initiated consultations for the development of a RPA.

### *Commitments to Advancing Gender Equality*

ASEAN has introduced a number of regional frameworks that address gender equality in peacetime as well as during conflict. These include the Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Women (RPA on EVAW) (2015), a comprehensive framework for protecting women against physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence. The RPA on EVAW recognizes this violence is the result of historical and structural imbalances in power relations between genders.<sup>215</sup> Inclusivity is also a pillar of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025, and is a key element of the rules-based, people-centered concept enshrined in the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint of 2025.<sup>216</sup> In the APSC, the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (ASEAN-IPR) is tasked with helping to raise voices of moderation in the culture of ASEAN. AIPR undertakes research, capacity-building, developing a pool of expertise, networking, and information dissemination in service of peace, conflict management, and conflict resolution. It also houses the ASEAN Women for Peace Registry (AWPR, est. Dec. 2018)— a network to contribute to the implementation of the 2017 Joint Statement.<sup>217</sup>

## **PARTICIPATION IN PEACE PROCESSES**

### **Women's Civil Society Organizations**

Women across Southeast Asia have been extremely proactive in their efforts to build peace. In 2000, more than 500 women from Aceh convened a dialogue for peace. The dialogue yielded 22 recommendations which were disseminated to the Indonesian government. Women from the dialogue requested that the Indonesian government form an official peace

---

<sup>212</sup> "The Role of Women Negotiators and Mediators in Maintenance of Regional Peace and Security," 2020, <https://womenmediators.net/the-role-of-women-negotiators-and-mediators-in-maintenance-of-regional-peace-and-security/>.

<sup>213</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, "ASEAN Ministerial Dialogue on Strengthening Women's Role for Sustainable Peace and Security," Sep 2020,

<https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/wpsasean2020?cate=5d5bcb4e15e39c306000683e>.

<sup>214</sup> "ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security," ASEAN, 2021.

<sup>215</sup> "ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence Against Women," ASEAN, 2015,

<https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/48.-December-2017-ASEAN-RPA-on-EVAW-2nd-Reprint.pdf>.

<sup>216</sup> "ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025," 2016, <https://asean.org/storage/2016/01/ASCC-Blueprint-2025.pdf>

<sup>217</sup> "ASEAN Women for Peace Registry," ASEAN, <https://asean-aipr.org/asean-women-peace-registry/>.

conference containing both men and women mediators.<sup>218</sup> In 2011, women in Southern Thailand established the Council of Muslim Women's Organization Cooperation for Peace (CMCP), a network of 21 Muslim women's organizations who use a traditional Islamic framework to promote peace.<sup>219</sup> In a similar vein, Nisa Ul Haqq, a Bangsamoro women's group, uses Islamic teachings to encourage the harmonious coexistence of different religious and ethnic groups.<sup>220</sup> In Myanmar, various women's CSOs working toward conflict transformation, including the Karen Women's Organization, the Kachin Women's Association, and the Shan Women's Action Network, joined forces under the umbrella organization, The Women's League of Burma.<sup>221</sup>

## **Inclusion in Official Peace Processes**

Governments in Southeast Asia have been slow to engage with women's groups despite the valuable insights they could provide and their substantial contributions to transforming regional conflicts. Women remain at the margins of formal peace initiatives. The Indonesian government failed to implement the recommendations produced by the Acehese women's dialogue. Indonesian authorities also neglected to hold a second dialogue, and conflict continued in the province for another five years.<sup>222</sup> Just one woman was invited to participate in the official 2005 Helsinki peace talks. Furthermore, the peace settlement did not contain any provisions for women.<sup>223</sup> In Thailand, women continue to occupy peripheral roles in official mediation efforts. No data is available for the most recent 2020 round of meetings between Bangkok and Malay Muslim insurgents. However, just one woman held a "supporting role" during the 2015 peace negotiations.<sup>224</sup>

Myanmar's government confirmed its commitment to increasing women's visibility in peace processes on two occasions. In the National Ceasefire Agreement—a 2015 accord between the central government and various ethnic armed organizations—authorities pledged to "include a reasonable number of women in the political dialogue process." In the same year, Myanmar authorities vowed to raise the share of women in peace delegations to 30%. However, women comprised a paltry 7% of participants at a major 2016 peace conference.<sup>225</sup> Just four women were invited to participate in senior peace delegations, comprising less than 6% of formal negotiating teams.<sup>226</sup> Moreover, when women have been included in Myanmar's peace talks, their voices are often eclipsed by elite military players.<sup>227</sup>

Of the countries surveyed in this paper, the Philippines has made the most progress regarding the inclusion of women in formal peace processes. A historic peace agreement was brokered

---

<sup>218</sup> Kamaruzzaman, "Agents for Change: The Roles of Women in Aceh's Peace Process" (London: Conciliation Resources, 2008).

<sup>219</sup> Amporn Marddent, "Religious discourse and gender security in southern Thailand." *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 12.2 (2019).

<sup>220</sup> Conciliation Resources, "Women's Meaningful Participation in Peace: Lessons from the Bangsamoro," (2017).

<sup>221</sup> Mollie Pepper, "Women in Myanmar's Peace Process," *The Asia Dialogue*, Oct 2017, <https://theasiadialogue.com/2017/10/05/women-in-myanmars-peace-process/>.

<sup>222</sup> Kamaruzzaman, "Agents for Change."

<sup>223</sup> Gayatri, "The Role of Women in Peace Building in Indonesia."

<sup>224</sup> Duanghathai Buranajaroenkij, "Women and the Peace Process in the Deep South of Thailand," (Peace Resource Collaborative, 2018).

<sup>225</sup> Pepper, "Women in Myanmar's Peace Process."

<sup>226</sup> Bardall and Bjarnegard, "The Exclusion of Women in Myanmar Politics Helped Fuel the Military Coup."

<sup>227</sup> United States Institute of Peace (USIP), "Creating an Inclusive Burmese Peace Process," May 2017, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/05/creating-inclusive-burmese-peace-process>.

in 2014 between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, a major armed insurgent group in Mindanao. Women's CSOs were consulted at each stage of the negotiations. Women represented 22% of negotiators and 27% of signatories. Miriam Coronel-Ferrer, the government's principal negotiator during the Bangsamoro negotiations, was the first woman in history to sign a major peace settlement with an insurgent group while acting as chief negotiator.<sup>228</sup> Women engaged in these talks championed an inclusive peace process and orchestrated a nationwide consultation to ensure that the perspectives of traditionally marginalized communities were highlighted in the peace agreement.<sup>229</sup>

## **PARTICIPATION IN NATIONAL SECURITY INSTITUTIONS**

### **Government Efforts to Increase Women's Participation**

#### *Military Organizations*

Countries in Southeast Asia have taken steps to increase the number of women serving in national military and defense organizations. In 2014—for the first time in 50 years—92 women cadets graduated from Myanmar's officer training school in Yangon. By 2019, Myanmar's military contained more than 400 women officers.<sup>230</sup>

Women in Timor-Leste have long supported the country's military efforts. Many joined armed independence movements as combatants during Timor's fight for self-determination.<sup>231</sup> Women have been allowed to join Timor-Leste's military since it came into existence in 2002, and Timorese women have attained high-ranking military positions.<sup>232</sup>

The Philippines has adopted strategies to protect women enrolled in its military from sexual harassment perpetrated by male troops and to encourage personnel to apply a gendered perspective during conflict. The government introduced gender-sensitivity training sessions for members of the armed forces and held gender and development briefings with senior military officials.<sup>233</sup>

#### *Law Enforcement*

Action has also been taken to facilitate women's involvement in domestic security structures. The Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Vietnam have all introduced quotas to promote

---

<sup>228</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, "The Philippines Case Study," <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/Philippines>.

<sup>229</sup> Tanya Henderson, Amanda Domingues, and Ursula Knudsen-Latta, "Promoting Women's Political Participation: A Pathway to Peace," U.S. CSWG POLICYbrief, 2018, <https://www.wiisglobal.org/publication/promoting-womens-political-participation-a-pathway-to-peace/>

<sup>230</sup> Miemie Winn Byrd, "Integration of Women and Gender Perspective into the Myanmar Armed Forces to Improve Civil-Military Relations in Myanmar," *Military Review*, Dec 2019, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/english-edition-archives/>.

<sup>231</sup> Edward Cavanaugh, "Timor-Leste's Forgotten Female Rebels," *Diplomat*, May 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/timor-lestes-forgotten-female-rebels/>.

<sup>232</sup> Marquita da Cunha, "From Where I Stand," UN Women, <https://unwomenusa.org/FWIS-Marquita-da-Cunha>.

<sup>233</sup> Aurora Quadra-Balibay, "AFP Intensifies Gender Equality for Women in the Military Ranks," *Good News Philippines*, Apr 2018, <https://www.goodnewspilipinas.com/afp-intensifies-gender-equality-for-women-in-the-military-ranks/>.

women's participation in law enforcement agencies.<sup>234</sup> There are currently 1,500 women in senior positions at Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security, which encompasses the police, security, and intelligence services.<sup>235</sup>

### *UN Peacekeeping*

Governments in the region have channeled efforts toward increasing the proportion of women in UN peacekeeping roles. In 2019, it was reported that half of UN peacekeepers from the Philippines were women, surpassing the UN's target of 30% women peacekeepers per country.<sup>236</sup> Approximately 160 Indonesian peacekeepers are women.<sup>237</sup> Moreover, while acting as president of the UN Security Council in August 2020, Indonesia secured a resolution that called on UN Member-States to increase the number of women in peacekeeping roles.<sup>238</sup> To a lesser degree, Vietnam and Thailand have worked to raise the number of women seconded to UN peacekeeping operations. Vietnam began posting members of its military to UN peacekeeping missions in 2014. In 2017, the first Vietnamese woman officer arrived in South Sudan. By 2019, the number of Vietnamese women officers in South Sudan had grown to 10.<sup>239</sup> As of 2020, Thailand has deployed more than a dozen female troops to UN operations.<sup>240</sup>

## **Remaining Challenges**

### *Representation*

Despite taking action to improve women's participation in the security sector, progress has been incremental. Women continue to be vastly outnumbered by men in national armed forces. Women comprise just 10% of the Indonesian military.<sup>241</sup> In the Philippines, they make up a mere 3.6% of the military.<sup>242</sup> Women accounted for 0.2% of Myanmar's armed forces in 2019.<sup>243</sup>

---

<sup>234</sup> UN Women, "Women in Law Enforcement in the ASEAN Region," 2020, <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/08/women-in-law-enforcement-in-the-asean-region>

<sup>235</sup> "ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security," ASEAN, 2021.

<sup>236</sup> Cathy Yang, "PH Ahead in Involving Women in Peacekeeping Missions: UN Official," *ABS-CBN*, Jun 2019, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/spotlight/06/05/19/ph-ahead-in-involving-women-in-peacekeeping-missions-un-official>.

<sup>237</sup> Dian Septiari, "COVID-19 Poses Challenges for Indonesia's Female Peacekeepers," *The Jakarta Post*, May 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/05/29/covid-19-poses-challenges-for-indonesias-female-peacekeepers.html>.

<sup>238</sup> Gayatri et al., "Indonesia's UN Security Council Drive for Inclusive Peace and Security," *The Interpreter*, Sep 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/indonesia-s-un-security-council-drive-inclusive-peace-and-security>

<sup>239</sup> Nhan Dan, "Vietnam Highlights Women's Role in Peacekeeping at UNSC Debate," Apr 2019, <https://en.nhandan.org.vn/politics/external-relations/item/7352202-vietnam-highlights-women%E2%80%99s-role-in-peacekeeping-at-uns-c-debate.html>.

<sup>240</sup> Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Thailand to the United Nations, "Thailand's Views on Institution Building and System-Wide Engagement for Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace," 2020, [https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/thailand\\_0.pdf](https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/thailand_0.pdf).

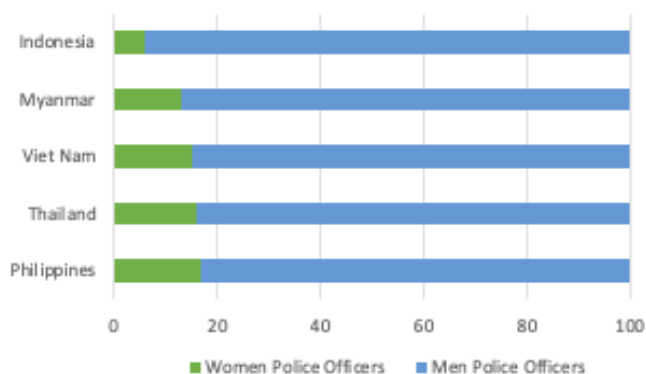
<sup>241</sup> Ivany Atina Arbi, "Long Road to Gender Equality in Indonesian Military," *The Jakarta Post*, Jun 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/06/26/long-road-to-gender-equality-in-indonesian-military.html#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20latest%20data,in%20the%20past%20two%20years.>

<sup>242</sup> Quadra-Balibay, "AFP Intensifies Gender Equality for Women in the Military Ranks."

<sup>243</sup> Byrd, "Integration of Women and Gender Perspective into the Myanmar Armed Forces."



Despite the adoption of quotas, women continue to be underrepresented in law enforcement



agencies. According to a recent UN report, women account for 17% of the Philippine police workforce. The Philippines was followed by Thailand (16%), Vietnam (15%), Myanmar (13%), and Indonesia (6%).<sup>244</sup> Moreover, with the exception of Myanmar, which has a 25% quota for women's participation in law enforcement, all countries have minimal quotas of 10%.<sup>245</sup>

2019.<sup>246</sup>

**Table 5: Police Officers by Gender,**

### *Unequal Participation*

Restrictions, backsliding, and sexist practices impose barriers to women's entry into different branches of the national security apparatus. Women members of the Timorese navy are unable to serve at sea.<sup>247</sup> Thailand banned women from joining a major police academy in Bangkok in 2019. This is a particularly unsettling development since only women police officers are permitted to interview victims of sexual assault under the country's laws.<sup>248</sup>

### **SUMMARY**

There has been some progress toward implementing the WPS agenda in the countries examined. The Philippines, Timor-Leste, and Indonesia have developed WPS NAPs. Though ASEAN has not yet introduced a RPA, it is developing one and has forged ahead on WPS through its 2017 Joint Statement and by holding meetings dedicated to accelerating regional WPS implementation.

However, in general, states have failed to translate commitments to advancing WPS into concrete action. Women remain at the fringes of official peace processes and security apparatus in Southeast Asia. State officials routinely overlook the tireless efforts of women's organizations in establishing peace. Many nations experiencing internal conflict have failed to consult these organizations and continue to exclude women from formal peace negotiations. In so doing, they have not leveraged the skills and expertise that these women could bring to negotiations. The Philippines is the only country where women have been

<sup>244</sup>UN Women, "Women in Law Enforcement in the ASEAN Region," 2020.

<sup>245</sup>UN Women, "Women in Law Enforcement in the ASEAN Region," 2020.

<sup>246</sup>UN Women, "Women in Law Enforcement in the ASEAN Region," 2020.

<sup>247</sup> Dylan Nicholson, "HMAS Maitland Promotes Inclusion During Visit to Timor-Leste," *Defence Connect*, Mar 2020, <https://www.defenceconnect.com.au/maritime-antisub/5748-hmas-maitland-promotes-inclusion-during-visit-to-timor-leste>.

<sup>248</sup> Jamie Fullerton, "Thai Police Academy Bans Women From Enrolling," *Guardian*, Sep 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/05/thai-police-academy-bans-women-from-enrolling>.

given influential roles in peace processes. Several nations have taken tentative steps to increase the number of female uniformed personnel. However, few women currently serve in national security institutions. Moreover, restrictions, backsliding, and sexist practices continue to impede women's entry into the sector.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper commemorated the 20th anniversary of the passage of UNSCR 1325 by examining the implementation of the WPS agenda in Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. It investigated wider societal progress toward gender equality and the localization of the WPS agenda.

The past two decades have seen major breakthroughs for women and girls in Southeast Asia. Gender imbalances are now virtually nonexistent in educational enrollment rates, with women outnumbering men at higher learning institutions. The gender gap is rapidly narrowing in senior management roles. Women's political representation has increased in recent years.

However, despite significant progress toward reducing gender imbalances, women's rights are far from attaining universal recognition in Southeast Asia. Gender-based violence poses the greatest threat to the full realization of women's rights in the region. Laws fail to protect victims from abuse. Moreover, discriminatory beliefs toward women and girls permeate educational institutions, the economy, and politics. Discrimination in public and private spheres is preventing the full formalization of WPS in the region.

Some countries have made progress in realizing WPS commitments. Several governments adopted NAPs or other WPS-related policy plans. Hopefully, these plans will pave the way to inclusive peace dialogues between policymakers and grassroots women's organizations. The Philippines made history by facilitating women's meaningful participation in the Mindanao peace process. Myanmar has vowed to amplify the voices of women in peace delegations, and the Thai government has started to acknowledge the instrumental nature of women's groups in building peace. Governments have also attempted to increase the number of female troops both at home and abroad. Women in the Burmese military have increased eightfold in the past five years, there is a greater number of Filipino women assigned to UN peacekeeping missions than men, and Indonesia developed a UN act urging countries to deploy more female peacekeepers.

Numerous challenges remain to implementing the WPS agenda. The Philippines is an exception when it comes to women's inclusion in formal peace processes. In Myanmar, women comprise less than 10% of participants in peace talks, while women in Thailand are either excluded from formal negotiations or they tend to be installed in auxiliary roles. In addition, women account for a negligible proportion of security forces.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jennifer Howe** ([jennifer.howe@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:jennifer.howe@kcl.ac.uk)) is a PhD student at the Department of War Studies, King's College London. Her research examines the under-explored relationship between truth commissions and violent extremism, with a particular focus on the ongoing conflict in Mindanao, Southern Philippines. She is a committee member of the King's-based initiative, Women in War and International Politics, and a fellow at the Centre for the Study of Divided Societies. Prior to joining King's, Jennifer worked as a resident Women, Peace and Security Fellow at the Pacific Forum. Her publications have investigated the impact of COVID-19 on conflict resolution and gender equality in Southeast Asia. She holds an M.A. in Politics and International Relations from Durham University, where she assessed the relationship between human rights compliance and transitional justice in East Asia.