

FEMINIST PEACE
AND SECURITY
AND THE *OTHER*
ASEAN WAY

BY MARIA TANYAG

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper aims to critically re-examine the role of “ASEAN Way” and regional governance more broadly in promoting feminist peace and security in Southeast Asia. Expansive definition and aspirations embodied by the ASEAN Way are typically traded for a more state-centric version. The term is commonly used as a short-hand for the failures and limitations of regional governance, and rarely for its virtues. Consequently, insufficient attention has been paid to how the ASEAN Way also relates to the agency of regional networks of civil society actors who collectively serve as the permanent background to regional governance in Southeast Asia. Bringing together disparate international relations scholarship on ASEAN regionalism and the WPS agenda, this paper makes a case for the importance of recognising this *other* and less examined aspect of ASEAN Way to arrive at a fuller account of both ASEAN regionalism and the gendered root causes of insecurity in Southeast Asia. It concludes with a recommendation to rectify knowledge gaps on the various strategies regional civil society networks employ to advance human rights and wellbeing in ASEAN including those aligned with the WPS agenda, while adapting to the enormous challenge of building and caring for a regional community perpetually beset by multiple crises.

INTRODUCTION

Peoples in Southeast Asia routinely face multiple and overlapping insecurities. For the most vulnerable and marginalized, this means simultaneously dealing with disasters, conflicts, violent political transitions, environmental degradation and everyday forms of violence rooted in economic inequalities. Women belonging to minority groups and situated in the poorest, remote, or rural areas face compounded harms, including gender-based violence and discrimination.¹ The protection and promotion of human rights – specifically women’s rights and wellbeing – are clearly important goals for regional governance in Southeast Asia. However, their very pursuit of peace and prosperity is shaped by constantly dealing with crises and emergencies that regularly threaten to reverse or impede regional governance efforts. Regional cooperation in Southeast Asia is also defined by a plurality of institutions and actors arising from diverse political, economic and socio-cultural systems unique to the region. Thus, Southeast Asian societies face similar sets of transboundary security issues, yet there is a variety to how these issues are experienced and interpreted. The underlying beliefs and assumptions on how best to address these security challenges may potentially be as diverse.

Within the rich body of scholarship on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and for over five decades now, there has been a lot of interest in understanding how member states address collective problems and achieve shared interests. This includes recognizing the “ASEAN Way” as the defining security feature among Southeast Asian countries. The term is commonly understood to refer to shared norms and principles that structure how ASEAN member states interact, particularly, how they manage and resolve internal conflicts. It has been defined as a distinctive “process-oriented approach”² and “sovereignty-enhancing regionalism”³ such that the regional order exists to stabilize domestic order rather than supplant it.⁴ The ASEAN Way is realized by non-interference, non-confrontation, informality and the twin methods of *musyawarah* and *mufakat* or consensual and consultative decision-making.⁵ It is also discursively used by members to socialize non-ASEAN countries to the attitudes and behaviors *expected* and practiced within the region. The conduct of diplomacy is marked by a “high degree of discreetness, informality, pragmatism, expediency, consensus-building, and non-confrontational bargaining styles.”⁶ ASEAN Way is predominantly framed as a negative symbol of regionalism that must be reformed. When examined in the context of ASEAN’s promotion and protection of human rights, including gender equality, this form of regional

¹ ASEAN and UN Women, *ASEAN Gender Outlook* (2021), <https://data.unwomen.org/publications/asean-gender-outlook>.

² Mely Caballero-Anthony, *Regional Security in Southeast Asia: Beyond the ASEAN Way* (2005), 4.

³ David Capie and Paul Evans, “The ASEAN Way,” in *The 2nd ASEAN Reader* compiled by Sharon Siddique and Sree Kumar (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), 45-51.

⁴ Taku Yukawa, “The ASEAN Way as a Symbol: An Analysis of Discourses on the ASEAN Norms,” *The Pacific Review* 31, no. 3 (2018): 298-314.

⁵ Amitav Acharya, “Ideas, Identity, and Institution-Building: From the ‘ASEAN Way’ to the ‘Asia-Pacific Way?’” *The Pacific Review* 10, no. 3 (1997), 329.

The origin of these norms is traced to Javanese society wherein a leader is expected to suggest “synthesized” conclusions and guidance for the community based on consultations with different participants of the community. Similar modes of traditional or indigenous collective decision-making are prevalent in other parts of Asia and the Pacific which emphasizes non-adversarial and community-enhancing decision-making processes such as *Talanoa*.

⁶ Acharya, “Ideas, identity, and institution-building” 330.

governance has been regarded as a barrier and one that constantly threatens to render ASEAN useless and obsolete.

Assessments on the incorporation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda into ASEAN regional governance reinforce these criticisms. The WPS agenda is composed of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and several subsequent resolutions. It represents the global framework for making the gendered causes and consequences of armed conflicts visible. The agenda envisions change across its four main pillars: participation, conflict prevention, protection and relief and recovery. Southeast Asian countries separately and collectively as ASEAN have been implicitly and explicitly interpreted as “lagging behind” or “underachieving” in the promotion of the WPS agenda.⁷ For instance, only Indonesia and the Philippines have developed “WPS-tagged” action plans. ASEAN issued a Joint Statement on Promoting Women, Peace and Security in 2017, though the region is yet to develop a regional action plan. This (lack of or slow) progress is interpreted as evidence of the distinctive elitism and conservatism encapsulated by the ASEAN Way.⁸ However, feminist scholars have critiqued that the “successes” and “failures” in implementing the WPS agenda tend to be primarily measured in terms of the development of action plans at national and regional levels. This is done often without equal attention to how state and non-state actors have been practicing and innovating on the constituent goals of WPS in ways that speak to their local contexts and priorities, and outside the “WPS brand.” Consequently, they argue that this approach creates and reinforces hierarchical ecologies built around the WPS agenda providing Global North actors with disproportionate visibility and influence.⁹ By contrast, “[t]he global South has mainly been identified as a site of implementation not as a site of policy-design or decision-making, despite the rich experience and knowledge of conflict resolution.”¹⁰ The implementation of the WPS agenda, if narrowly focused on securitized conflict and other crisis

⁷ See for examples Hui Ying Lee, Slow progress in the age of #MeToo, Women, Peace and Security in ASEAN Policy Forum, 19 July 2018, <https://www.policyforum.net/women-peace-andsecurity-in-asean/>; Melissa Liberatore, “Women, Peace and Security Finally on ASEAN’s Radar,” *Australian Strategic Policy Institute The Strategist*, 22 June 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/women-peace-and-security-finally-on-aseans-radar/>; and Jane Sloane, “Toward a Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security in Asia,” *In Asia: Insights and Analysis*, 12 July 2017, <https://asiafoundation.org/2017/07/12/toward-regional-action-plan-women-peace-security-asia/>.

⁸ As Mathew Davies rightly points out, the ASEAN Way is typically invoked whenever ASEAN fails to do something. See his article “Women and Development, Not Gender and Politics: Explaining ASEAN’s Failure to Engage with the Women, Peace and Security Agenda” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 1 (2016), 106–127.

⁹ Toni Haastrup, “WPS and the African Union,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Women, Peace and Security*, eds. Sara E Davies and Jacqui True (2019), 384; Jamie J. Hagen, and Toni Haastrup “Global Racial Hierarchies and the Limits of Localization via National Action Plans,” in *New Directions in Women, Peace and Security* eds. Soumita Basu, Paul Kirby, and Laura J. Shepherd (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020), 133–152; Swati Parashar, “The WPS Agenda: A Postcolonial Critique,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Women, Peace, and Security* eds. Sara E. Davies, and Jacqui True (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 829–839; Marsha Henry, “On the Necessity of Critical Race Feminism for Women, Peace and Security,” *Critical Studies on Security* 9, no. 1 (2021), 22–26; María Martín de Almagro “Producing Participants: Gender, Race, Class, and Women, Peace and Security,” *Global Society* 32, no. 4 (2018), 395–414; and Soumita Basu, “The Global South writes 1325 (too),” *International Political Science Review* 37, no. 3 (2016), 362–374; Caitlin Hamilton et al., “The Social Life of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: A Digital Social Network Analysis,” *Global Society* (2021). DOI: 10.1080/13600826.2021.1875996.

¹⁰ Miriam Mona Muller and Ambika Varma, <https://ogiporg.wixsite.com/home/post/advancing-the-wps-agenda-through-regional-governance-in-for-or-by-the-global-south>.

situations can reinforce silos rather than bridge different forms of violence that also occur in “everyday life.”¹¹

This paper aims to critically re-examine the role of ASEAN Way and regional governance more broadly in promoting feminist peace and security in Southeast Asia. Bringing together international relations scholarship on ASEAN regionalism and the WPS agenda, it makes a case for the importance of feminist and postcolonial lenses for recognizing the *other* and less examined aspects of ASEAN Way in relation to the promotion and protection of human rights, and specifically the WPS agenda. By the ‘other’ ASEAN Way, I mean how regional civil society actors envision and seek to enact change within constrained conditions and, at times, immovable state power structures in Southeast Asia. The central argument that I develop in this paper is that understanding the other ASEAN Way from the perspective of non-state actors provides a fuller account of both ASEAN regionalism and the gendered root causes of insecurity in Southeast Asia. I draw on the regional promotion of the WPS agenda as a case study to illustrate how the agency of ASEAN regional networks of civil society actors might be taken for granted, devalued or rendered invisible in mainstream explanations of regional security despite their labor, strategies, and visions constituting the permanent background to regional governance in Southeast Asia. Consequently, there remain considerable knowledge gaps as to how they too are advancing human rights and wellbeing in ASEAN, including toward goals aligned with the WPS agenda in their own way while adapting to the enormous challenge of building and caring for a regional community perpetually beset by multiple crises.

My analysis is divided into three main parts. The first section discusses the prevailing state-centric treatment of the ASEAN Way and its significance for generating truncated understandings of regionalism and gendered insecurities in Southeast Asia. The second section turns to the promotion of the WPS agenda and broader efforts to build gender-responsive peace and security in ASEAN. I show that dominant accounts identify the problem as that of ASEAN needing to be fixed rather than, or without due regard to, the extent to which the global WPS agenda itself is automatically assumed as compatible with the interests of different state and non-state actors in Southeast Asia. There is thus a conspicuous silence on the varying responses to the WPS agenda and broader efforts of regional civil society to promote inclusive peace and security in ASEAN. The third and final section concludes by underscoring the importance of the *other* ASEAN Way for situating the WPS agenda in relation to the longer history and agency of regional civil society networks in Southeast Asia. This approach has far-reaching implications for informing scholarly, practitioner and policy discussions of rendering regional and global governance “fit for purpose” to respond to climate-induced and overlapping crises. Amid considerable diversity, historically-specific configurations of political authority, and extraordinary exposure to multiple crises from conflicts to disasters and climate change, how do we learn from the agency and change-making of peoples, especially women and minority groups, in search of peace?

¹¹ Maria Tanyag, “Bridging the Protection Gap: Rethinking the ‘Three Pillars’ to Eliminate Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in ASEAN” in Charles T. Hunt and Noel M. Morada (Eds.), *Regionalism and Human Protection: Reflections from Southeast Asia and Africa*, (Leiden; Boston: Brill | Nijhoff, 2018), 76-97.

WHICH WAY IS THE ASEAN WAY?

The idea that there are shared cultural identities, values, and practices among Southeast Asian peoples is widely established across different academic disciplines and in policy discussions. The various explanations include analysis of change and continuity across early or pre-modern, colonial, and postcolonial Asian societies to account for distinct understandings of political and economic authority in the region. Southeast Asian peoples also share similar sets of environmental hazards due to their geographic location and as such, dynamically develop ecological awareness that informs strategies and institutions for addressing collective security issues. Shared identity and culture are among the main basis for explaining the shared goals that drive Southeast Asian regionalism. Perhaps the most well-known concept embodying the interrelatedness of culture and security in Southeast Asia is the “ASEAN Way.” Estrella Solidum, a Filipina political scientist who is known in the region as “Ms. ASEAN,” was a pioneering scholar of Southeast Asian regionalism.¹² Her early articulations of the ASEAN Way and the formation of the regional community more broadly constituted an expansive notion of culture and security. For her, culture constitutes the set of “learned responses of a particular society.” Moreover, “culture represents an integration of past experiences and forms a configuration, of parts which are to some degree interrelated. Culture consists of social integration, adjustment of traits comprising a way of life, ethos on how life should be lived, and social relationships such as drinking together, worshipping in common, organizations, organic solidarity and desire to stay together.”¹³

In addition to the ASEAN Way’s common usage referring to the norms and procedures of ASEAN that develop over time and the principles that animate early and contemporary forms of regional cooperation, Solidum understood the ASEAN Way as built on and sustained by cultural similarities among Southeast Asian societies, particularly their “learned responses” to collective security risks and hazards. Like other Southeast Asian scholars of her time, she understood that “international problems can be solved by regionalizing them.”¹⁴ The ASEAN Way defined in this manner, “derives as much, if not more, from the indigenous political, strategic and cultural make-up of the member states, and their practical experience in dealing with problems and challenges affecting regional stability.”¹⁵ For instance, participatory regionalism in ASEAN has a cross-cultural basis in localized, community or village-level consultative forms of decision-making observed in the *kampung*s of Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia as well as *barangays* in the Philippines. Indeed, even the wider scholarship on regional security affirm how geopolitics, history and culture shape the way actors in the Asia Pacific region and particularly Southeast Asia develop distinct strategies and institutions for addressing traditional and non-traditional security issues.¹⁶

¹² Noel Morada, “Professor Estrella D. Solidum, 1927–2014,” *Philippine Political Science Journal* 35, no. 2 (2014), 131-133.

¹³ Solidum quoted in Amitav Acharya, “Culture, Security, Multilateralism: The ‘ASEAN Way’ and Regional Order,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 19, no. 1 (1998), 81.

¹⁴ Estrella Solidum, “The Pacific Community in Search of a Form,” *Asian Perspective* 9, no. 2 (1985), 214.

¹⁵ Acharya, “Culture, Security, Multilateralism,” 57.

¹⁶ John Charles Ryan (ed), *Southeast Asian Ecocriticism: Theories, Practices and Prospects* (New York: Lexington Books, 2018); Rosemary Foot and Evelyn Goh, “The International Relations of East Asia: A New Research Prospectus,” *International Studies Review* 21 (2019), 398-423; Mely Caballero-Anthony, Alistair D. B. Cook and Christopher Chen, “Reimagining the global humanitarian system: Emerging dynamics in the

Recuperating ASEAN Way, defined as ‘cross-cultural shared knowledge’ and ‘learned responses’ to collective security risks and hazards that women and men partake in, enriches our understanding of peace and security. The ASEAN Way reflects the enduring importance of culture in shaping security cooperation and regional and global governance more broadly. Analyzing ASEAN Way in this manner would then involve accounting for varieties in meaning-making and enactment of security through a “series of learning situations” as diverse peoples and societies adapt to and with their environments.¹⁷ Potentially, as a concept and practice, the ASEAN Way may provide important lessons for ensuring that regional governance is equipped for the overlapping crises that will be a prominent feature of climate change. This is because as I argue here and elsewhere, consensus and deliberative decision-making, which are also components of the ASEAN Way, are crucial not simply for arriving at a common position vis-à-vis security issues. Importantly, they matter for comprehensively mapping different regional security risks.

The expansive definition and aspirations embodied by the ASEAN Way are typically traded for a more state-centric version. The ASEAN Way is now a short-hand for the failures and limitations of regional governance in Southeast Asia, rarely is it discursively used to highlight ASEAN’s virtues. In the context of human rights and violence prevention and including for the WPS agenda, the ASEAN Way has come to be a symbol of what makes ASEAN conservative, inefficient, and thus the subject of reform.¹⁸ State-centric analyses of the ASEAN Way focus on the strict adherence of member states to state sovereignty, non-interference, and consensus decision-making. These translate in practice to a top-down and elitist regional decision-making exclusive to predominantly male state representatives. Over time, these principles have come to define the “problematic” identity of ASEAN. According to Yukawa, the term “ASEAN Way” was strategically used in the early 1990s and was linked with the broader opposition to “Western human rights diplomacy” based on “Asian values.” Toward the latter part of the 1990s, the ASEAN Way became more frequently used in relation to tensions among member states and was recognized as Southeast Asia’s “brand” of conflict management.¹⁹ Claims to the existence of ASEAN norms and principles are based on analyses of the interactions of member states and their agents, and rarely in the context of interactions among non-state actors or ASEAN regional civil society. The ASEAN Way is thus only ever understood in relation to state-led regional security processes. Few studies examine the shared norms, values and practices that have emerged and are reproduced by regional civil society actors as they navigate on the one hand adapting to the political conditions imposed by the ASEAN Way; and on the other, responding to the uniquely compounded regional security challenges. There is an imbalance in the discussion of the regional security drivers in Southeast Asia between an over emphasis on the recalcitrance of member states, and the undervaluing of

Asia Pacific,” *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 56:102098 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2021.102098>.

¹⁷ Solidum, “The Pacific Community,” 216.

¹⁸ Taku Yukawa, “The ASEAN Way as a Symbol: An Analysis of discourses on the ASEAN Norms,” *The Pacific Review* 31, no. 3 (2018), 298-314.

¹⁹ Yukawa, “The ASEAN Way as a Symbol,” 305. See also Gillian Goh, “The ‘ASEAN Way’ Non-Intervention and ASEAN’s Role in Conflict Management,” *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs* 3, no. 1 (2003), 113-118.

agency of regional networks of civil society actors as well as the even more neglected interdependence of the two.²⁰

Scrutiny of the ASEAN Way is of course important especially given the clear and concerning evidence on the track-record of ASEAN member states vis-à-vis human rights and state-sanctioned violence. Norms of non-interference and consensual decision-making among ASEAN member states may and, as has been the case, lead to failures in preventing mass atrocities, promoting accountability and building a truly caring community among Southeast Asian peoples. I situate the broader thrust of this paper in relation to existing analysis of regional governance problems and ‘crises’ that typically place the blame solely on ASEAN elites and the culturally-distinctive norms and practices embodied by the ASEAN Way. However, pathologies attributed to ASEAN regionalism are reflected in and interlinked with pathologies reproduced at the global level and, as such, are not inherent to Southeast Asian countries alone. For instance, the principles of non-interference, respect for sovereignty and non-confrontation in interstate affairs are global norms and have also been observed to stymie global cooperation on promoting human rights and addressing collective security problems. Therefore, it is puzzling how ASEAN’s failures tend to be overdetermined as that of ASEAN’s own doing rather than symptomatic of pathologies rooted in or driven by the global order. In part, this is driven by regional civil society groups framing the ASEAN Way as specific to the collective reluctance of member states to genuinely implement human rights. Nevertheless, the tendency to overdetermine the *Southeast Asian-ness* of regional peace and security problems leads to a truncated understanding of their root causes. My point is that not only can international problems be solved regionally, but also regional problems cannot be solved without understanding how they are situated internationally.

This was evident in the case of the 1990s Asian Financial Crisis, a crisis widely acknowledged for its role in catalyzing greater regional economic cooperation among Southeast Asian countries. In the aftermath of the crisis, scholars observed how the economic crisis was represented as “Asian” in the making, despite its global root causes. Countries particularly Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia “pursued orthodox strategies of export-led growth and had exhibited ostensibly solid macroeconomic fundamentals” based on directives from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Yet, when their economies collapsed, dominant

²⁰ Other scholars have examined regional civil society in ASEAN and their implications for political economy, human rights and ‘non-traditional’ security issues. See Mely Caballero-Anthony, “Non-State Regional Governance Mechanism for Economic Security: The Case of the ASEAN Peoples’ Assembly,” *The Pacific Review* 17, no. 4 (2004), 567-585; Linda Quayle, “Bridging the gap: an ‘English School’ perspective on ASEAN and regional civil society,” *The Pacific Review* 25, no. 2 (2012), 199-222; Kelly Gerard, “ASEAN and Civil Society Activities in ‘Created Spaces’: the Limits of Liberty,” *The Pacific Review* 27, no. 2 (2014), 265-287; Laura Allison and Monique Taylor, “ASEAN’s ‘People-Oriented’ Aspirations: Civil Society Influences on Non-Traditional Security Governance,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 1 (2017), 24-41; Helen E. S. Nesadurai, “ASEAN During the Life of The Pacific Review: A Balance Sheet on Regional Governance and Community Building,” *The Pacific Review* 30, no. 6 (2017), 938-951; and Meredith Weiss, “Building Solidarity on the Margins: Seeking SOGIE Rights in ASEAN,” *Journal of Human Rights* 20, no. 2 (2021), 194-210. To date, however, there is no comprehensive study on the ASEAN Way as it applies to regional civil society actors, and in particular, their shared cultures or ‘learned responses’ in collectively dealing with regional security challenges working with and beyond ASEAN member states.

explanations emphasized “cultural and institutional sources of instability.”²¹ As Elias explains, this representation of the crisis as a “uniquely *Asian* crisis played a role in the failure of calls for a new international financial architecture” and to hold the IMF into account.²² Because the blame was placed on “Asian crony capitalism” and the economic irrationalities of Asian elites, this enabled the obscuring of how the crisis was precipitated by or had emerged from a crisis in global economic governance. The IMF, where ideas underpinning the economic policies of Southeast Asian countries ultimately derived, was insulated from reform. In fact, the solutions deployed by the IMF in response to the crisis were to double down on economic liberalization and impose austerity regimes on Southeast Asian governments, forcing them to produce surplus by cutting public expenditures.²³ Feminist scholars point out that austerity disproportionately impacts women, for they bear the brunt of cutbacks on social welfare.²⁴ As in the case of the Asian Financial Crisis, women physically “absorb” economic crises due to knock-on effects such as an increase in the demand for their care labor, their recourse to indebtedness and informal economic activities to supplement lost income, and a decline in wellbeing as women employed self-sacrificing practices such as eating less so children could survive.²⁵ This example illustrates how ‘orientalist’ depictions of Southeast Asia can displace responsibility for global systemic and structural problems, attributing them to culture. Moreover, they have gendered implications for the kind of solutions proffered, which subjects are made responsible for effecting change, and who bears the costs of peace.

SEARCHING FOR WPS IN ASEAN

There are similarities in how the promotion of human rights and the WPS agenda in ASEAN has been articulated in ways that “regionalize” globally systemic problems to promoting gender-responsive peace and security. Prevailing explanations of the WPS agenda among Southeast Asian countries and regionally through ASEAN exclusively attribute slow progress to the patriarchal institutions and elite conservatism in the region. Consequently, as in the case of the Asian Financial Crisis, there is a danger of essentializing pathologies as simply the outcome of ‘Southeast Asian-ness’ or the ASEAN Way, thereby preventing recognition of fundamental problems in how the WPS agenda is being “packaged” in ASEAN; and the agency of regional civil society actors in pursuing reform agendas in their own way and time.

I identify two prominent examples to illustrate my argument. The first relates to the “pillars gap” thesis. According to this explanation, the advancement of the WPS agenda in ASEAN is shaped by how the category of “women” have been interpreted and incorporated in a siloed manner within existing ASEAN institutional frameworks and rules. This is driven by the constitutive effects of ASEAN’s organisational culture and by the “mindset” of political elites. Women’s rights are addressed *separately* based on socio-cultural and economic rationales and

²¹ Wesley Widmaier, “Constructing Monetary Crises: New Keynesian Understandings and Monetary Cooperation in the 1990s,” *Review of International Studies* 29, (2003), 72.

²² Juanita Elias, “Whose Crisis? Whose Recovery? Lessons Learned (and Not) From the Asian crisis.” in *Scandalous Economics: Gender and the Politics of Crises*, eds. Aida A. Hozic and Jacqui True (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 110.

²³ Elias, “Whose Crisis?”; Walden Bello, “The Asian Financial Crisis: Causes, Dynamics, Prospects.” *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* 4, no. 1 (1999), 33-55.

²⁴ Hozic and True 2016; Diane Elson, “Economic Crises from the 1980s to the 2010s,” in *New Frontiers in Feminist Political Economy* eds. Shirin M. Rai, and Georgina Waylen (2013), pp. 189-212.

²⁵ *Ibid.*; Elias, “Whose Crisis?.”

removed from political and security discussions. In the words of Davies, Nackers, and Teitt, the issue “has been largely confined to sociocultural or economic policy areas, which ASEAN leaders address separately from political and security concerns.”²⁶ As a result, only particular subjectivities emerge such that “women as agents for security and survivors of insecurity” are rarely discussed and this “WPS gap reflects *deeper institutional dynamics within ASEAN*.”²⁷ Similarly, Davies’ analysis of the concentration of women’s rights within a particular ASEAN community pillar chiefly identifies conservative mindsets as the root cause:

ASEAN elites remain largely committed to a conservative understanding of women (and crucially, not gender) as a homogeneous and separate category that requires specific and separate institutions. Significantly, this understanding of women has allowed elites to also frame addressing women’s issues as a vehicle in which to achieve their pre-existing concerns with economic growth and social and political stability, goals that are at the very heart of ASEAN’s mission.²⁸

That is, “gender rights are not viewed as being so contentious as they are not framed as referring to the agency of women so much as their role in strengthening societies, families and cultures.”²⁹

As I have argued elsewhere, the ASEAN experience replicates *global* challenges to advancing not just the WPS agenda but also in ensuring gender-responsive peace and security. ASEAN is not unique in the tendency to reproduce sharp dichotomies between states as masculine protectors and the collectively feminized and infantilized subjects of “women and children.”³⁰ Critical assessments of the WPS agenda’s global implementation stress the tendency to privilege protection over prevention, and to represent women as either innately pacifist or as “superheroines” upon whose backs post-crisis recovery of societies are built.³¹ Furthermore, even the institutional failures of ASEAN from a feminist perspective can be seen as not entirely regionally-specific. I argue that:

while the [ASEAN] community building phase which has created the ‘three pillars’ approach has paved the way for establishing the language of human protection within ASEAN, it has paradoxically also served to create ‘silos’ in the prevention of SGBV and promotion of gender-equality more broadly.³²

Protection gaps are prevalent globally, and they continue to occur because global frameworks continue to neglect how the drivers of conflicts and gender-based violence are causally linked

²⁶ Sara E. Davies, Kimberly Nackers and Sarah Teitt, “Women, Peace and Security as an ASEAN Priority,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68, no. 3 (2014), 335.

²⁷ Emphasis added, Davies, Nackers, and Teitt, “Women, Peace and Security as an ASEAN Priority,” 342.

²⁸ Davies, “Women and Development, Not Gender and Politics,” 108.

²⁹ Davies, “Women and Development, Not Gender and Politics,” 119.

³⁰ Tanyag, “Bridging the Protection Gap.”

³¹ Laura J. Shepherd, “Sex, Security and Superhero(in)Es: From 1325 to 1820 and Beyond,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13, no. 4 (2011), 504–21; Cohn, C., Kinsella, H. and Gibbings, S. 2004.

‘Women, Peace and Security: Resolution 1325’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 6 (1): 130–40.

³² Tanyag, “Bridging the Protection Gap,” 90.

to the global political economy.³³ Indeed, feminist scholars have argued that part of enacting feminist peace is to understand and respond to the ‘continuum of violence’ wherein solutions employed thread together how and why sexual and gender-based violence occurs both in crisis situations and everyday life.³⁴ There is a risk that the WPS agenda leads to the securitization of women’s experiences in conflicts and other crisis situations which has “either detracted from, or served to depoliticize, comprehensive gender equality goals and outcomes.”³⁵ Women’s unequal status within Southeast Asia and globally will remain intact as a consequence of severing security from political economy.

So how do we account for why and how ASEAN developed its regional approach to women’s rights? Situating ASEAN-specific critiques from a feminist postcolonial perspective reveals that ASEAN’s development of institutionally complex mechanisms to promote gender equality and women’s rights has kept pace with the same instrumentalist incorporation of “gender” into neoliberal global agendas. Gerard’s analysis of how ASEAN has incorporated elements of participatory regionalism through “created spaces” is particularly illustrative of this trend.³⁶ According to her, ASEAN’s shift toward being “people-oriented” and “people-centered” serves to legitimize, rather than reconstitute, its neoliberal market-building efforts. That is, ASEAN’s engagement with regional civil society networks and actors allows for it to “edit out” actors and issues deemed incompatible with its economic agenda. Unsurprisingly, as Pisano points out, “there are no references to human rights or, specifically, to women’s and children’s rights in the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint.”³⁷ ASEAN is a willing accomplice in reproducing a neoliberal logic whereby women are expected to be “agents of their own salvation” and fashioned as “resilient” all while their responsibilities are compounded without redistribution of power and resources within their societies and globally.³⁸

The second example refers to the “technocratic lag” thesis. From this perspective, the state of the WPS agenda in ASEAN is explained in terms of technical know-how and the need to “upskill” the region on the importance of WPS. While seemingly value-neutral, this account of WPS in ASEAN has the effect of rendering ASEAN’s regional governance as the problem and the WPS agenda as unproblematic. The technocratic lag thesis is evident in the pioneering ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security which was published in 2021. This is the first study to systematically map the “significant momentum to advance an ASEAN regional normative framework for WPS, especially in the sectoral bodies under the ASEAN Political

³³ Jacqui True, *The Political Economy of Violence Against Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³⁴ Elias, “Whose Crisis?”; Tanyag, “Bridging the Protection Gap”; Tarja Väyrynen et al. (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Feminist Peace Research* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021).

³⁵ Jacqui True and Maria Tanyag “Global Violence and Security from a Gendered Perspective,” in Anthony Burke and Rita Parker (eds.), *Global Insecurity: Futures of Global Chaos and Governance* (Palgrave, 2017), 43–63.

³⁶ Gerard, “ASEAN and Civil Society Activities”; Kelly Gerard, “Explaining ASEAN’s Engagement of Civil Society in Policy-making: Smoke and Mirrors,” *Globalizations* 12, no. 3 (2015), 365-382.

³⁷ Attilio Pisanò, “Towards an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism: The ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 20, no. 3 (2016), 321-342.

³⁸ Shepherd, “Sex, Security and Superhero(in)Es”; Maria Tanyag, “Resilience, Female Altruism and Bodily Autonomy: Disaster-Induced Displacement in Post-Haiyan Philippines.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43 (2018), no. 3, 563-585.

and Security and Socio-Cultural Community Pillars.”³⁹ Its core recommendation is the development of a regional action plan “with specific goals, objectives, activities, indicators, and a regional institutional mechanism to implement and coordinate these actions across ASEAN pillars and sectors that reflects the relevance and application of the WPS agenda in ASEAN beyond traditional conceptions of its application only in the context of armed conflict.”⁴⁰ The report further states,

Despite the referenced efforts and incremental progress to date for advancing the WPS agenda within ASEAN, there is no sustained, regular regional forum or mechanism that specifically focuses on women in conflict and post-conflict situations or for advancing the women, peace and security agenda. This may be the result of the *lack of a shared understanding* among AMS [ASEAN member states] on what the WPS agenda entails and its relevance to ASEAN [emphasis added].⁴¹

The analysis and recommendations of the report reproduce what Davies calls an automatic assumption that regional organizations enhance human rights governance and that they “serve as conduits for the diffusion of human rights governance templates.”⁴² The implementation of the WPS agenda via the creation of new action plans and WPS-tagged mechanisms is treated as “common sense.” At the same time, the report also stressed the need to coordinate and integrate WPS efforts across all ASEAN community pillars. This raises the question of why is there a need to create more institutions, and specialized ones at that, only to then be faced by the same perennial problem of inaction or lack of coordination among ever-complex ASEAN bureaucratic actors and processes?

The report noted that among the limitations of the study is that research participants interviewed “had an interest in the advancement of WPS,” thus accounting for a “social desirability bias.”⁴³ The study did not seek out alternative approaches, perspectives, and explanations as to why not all ASEAN members states and civil society actors engage with the WPS agenda. The terms of discussion are pre-defined to leave unquestioned the desirability of WPS governance templates; and, unintentionally perhaps, to silence viable strategies and alternative modes of pursuing the same goals of ensuring gender equality is at the heart of regional peace and security. The report, therefore, does not offer information on the diversity of approaches within Southeast Asia especially in terms of the alternative spaces and agendas developed by civil society groups to work around the ASEAN Way. What it does reveal is a need to develop the evidence-base to show that generating specific WPS action plans makes a causal difference in comparison or addition to other pre-existing gender equality and sustainable development laws and frameworks across the region. Furthermore, research on gender, peace and security must include equal attention to existing strategies developed in other ASEAN countries that are comparable or complementary to WPS-tagged national action plans.

³⁹ ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), (2021), 1. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ASEAN-WPS-Study-01082021.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 4.

⁴¹ Ibid, 19.

⁴² Mathew Davies, “How Regional Organizations Respond to Human Rights: ASEAN’s Ritualism in Comparative Perspective,” *Journal of Human Rights* 20, no. 2 (2021), 247.

⁴³ ASEAN WPS Study p. 14.

The technocratic lag thesis is not sufficient as an explanation for the state of WPS agenda in Southeast Asia precisely because of the strong and sustained efforts of practitioner-activism particularly in the ASEAN Socio-cultural community.⁴⁴ Moving beyond state-centric accounts of ASEAN, we find “more activist and progressive understanding of gender as a key variable of political change that dominates those ASEAN institutions dedicated to women.”⁴⁵ In other words, analysis of the WPS agenda in ASEAN must account for the agency of practitioner-activists and broader human rights regional networks in Southeast Asia. Existing explanations to the WPS agenda in ASEAN underappreciate the role of other regional actors and in so doing, tend to privilege a partial and negative account of the ASEAN Way. Whether as a result of the “pillars gap” or as “technocratic lag,” ASEAN is effectively positioned within what feminist scholars have observed as the spatial and racial logics of the WPS agenda.⁴⁶ As Basu argues, there are a number of reasons for “non-implementation” of WPS such as “limited utility of UNSCR [UN Security Council Resolution] 1325 in a given context; differences between CSOs [civil society organizations]; as well as a more fundamental opposition to the ideological moorings of the resolution.”⁴⁷ I make these distinctions not to mean that the goals and objectives enshrined in the WPS agenda are not important or necessary in the ASEAN context. Yet, to automatically assume compatibility with the competing pursuits and priorities of Southeast Asia’s state and non-state actors is to both impose a hegemonic understanding of security and deny their own insights of what works and what does not. In the absence of critical voices in the ASEAN assessment of the WPS agenda, there is a danger of replicating global pathologies regionally. Lastly, to continue to do so is to also completely ignore how regional governance is a critical site for contestation and change.

How might ASEAN regional civil society actors challenge conventional ‘security’ scripts reproduced through a regional WPS agenda? The answers to this question cannot be fully examined here. Instead, this paper can only present important starting points in searching for the ‘spirit’ of WPS within ASEAN. For instance, we do know that resistance and demands to change ASEAN have long come from within the region. By now, part of the ASEAN Way is the range of “learned responses” and change-making by regional civil society actors. There is a wealth of experience from “regional civil society groups who have had to compromise to gain recognition as ASEAN’s partner as well as build trust with ASEAN by identifying areas of interest to member states and by treading softly on controversial issues.”⁴⁸ Intrastate conflicts and the state of human rights within member countries are widely recognized as among those controversial issues which cannot be openly discussed and must not be used as a ‘yardstick’ for financial cooperation and development assistance.⁴⁹ Regionally advancing the constituent goals of WPS in meaningful and pragmatic ways may require working around these political sensitivities and instead appeal to ASEAN’s least common denominator. That is, shifting WPS away from its origins in conflict situations and moving more toward established regional security issues that have broad support and relevance, such as in the case of disasters and

⁴⁴ Davies, “How Regional Organizations Respond.”

⁴⁵ Davies, “How Regional Organizations Respond,” 114.

⁴⁶ Basu, “The Global South writes 1325”; Martín de Almagro, “Producing Participants”; Parashar, “The WPS Agenda”; Hastrup, “WPS and the African Union”; Hamilton et al., “The Social Life of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda”; Henry, “On the Necessity of Critical Race.”

⁴⁷ Basu, “The Global South writes 1325,” 370.

⁴⁸ Nesadurai, “ASEAN During the Life of The Pacific Review,” 944.

⁴⁹ Yuyun Wahyuningrum, “A Decade of Institutionalizing Human Rights in ASEAN: Progress and Challenges,” *Journal of Human Rights* 20, no. 2 (2021), 158-175.

humanitarian emergencies or human trafficking. Indeed, ASEAN civil society actors, especially women's rights activists, demonstrate learned creativity and imagination in finding 'discursive entry points' within existing ASEAN documents – as opposed to creating new institutions – to embed and integrate progress on human rights across all areas of ASEAN regionalism.⁵⁰ As Parashar points out, “[w]omen’s transnational movements are the strongest in the Global South, looking beyond states and borders to create networks for women/gender activism; they have also altered their vocabularies of resistance from ‘protection’ and ‘security’ to ‘freedom’ and ‘access.’”⁵¹ This means that paradoxically, we might better find the pursuit of WPS by Southeast Asian women’s regional civil society actors not in whether or not ASEAN develops specific action plans that use the language of ‘security’ but elsewhere. For example, in the work done by regional civil society groups in building a truly inclusive security community ‘from the margins’ through promoting Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE) rights;⁵² and in efforts to change how women’s labor force participation is framed in the national economic agendas of Southeast Asian countries and in its regional political economy more generally.⁵³

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to achieve two main objectives. First, by engaging with the broader concept of the ASEAN Way as a central feature of Southeast Asian regionalism, I demonstrated a tendency to pathologize ASEAN for problems that are also global in nature. Consequently, the ASEAN Way is understood almost exclusively in relation to the failures of regional governance and rarely in relation to its virtues. Second, I examined how this same tendency is replicated in the analysis of the WPS agenda and ASEAN. Explanations automatically assume the desirability and compatibility of the WPS agenda with regional governance and therefore frame ASEAN as the only site of reform. However, as I have shown, focusing on how crises and insecurities are rooted in “Southeast Asian-ness,” obscures global structures of power. Consequently, these structures remain impervious to critique, and we fail to collectively harness different scales of governance for political transformation for feminist peace and security in ASEAN. The implications of these findings extend beyond regionalizing the WPS agenda to opening new lines of inquiry on how regional peace and security can be made inclusive, comprehensive, and enduring.

What does it mean to actually recognize and value the *other* ASEAN Way? This paper emphasizes a different view of security community building in Southeast Asia by calling for greater focus on the role of regional civil society actors and networks. The absence of sustained investigation on the efficacy of other WPS pathways pursued within the region needs to be urgently rectified. Future research should seek to examine to what extent does the creation of

⁵⁰ Wahyuningrum, “A Decade of Institutionalizing”; Ma. Lourdes Veneracion-Rallonza, “Building the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the ASEAN through Multi-Focal Norm Entrepreneurship,” *Global Responsibility to Protect* 8 (2016), 158–179.

⁵¹ Parashar, “The WPS Agenda.”

⁵² Anthony J. Langlois et al., “Community, Identity, Orientation: Sexuality, Gender and Rights in ASEAN,” *The Pacific Review* (2017), DOI: 10.1080/09512748.2017.1294613; Weiss, “Building Solidarity on the Margins.”

⁵³ Juanita Elias, “The Gendered Political Economy of Southeast Asian Development,” in *The Political Economy of Southeast Asia* ed. Toby Carroll, Shahar Hameiri and Lee Jones (Palgrave, 2020), 227-248.

increasingly specialized plans and institutions risk fragmenting rather than integrating hitherto underexamined efforts by ASEAN non-state actors to interrelatedly promote sustainable development, climate change adaptation, and human rights at a juncture when cohesive peace and security mechanisms are most needed? Contrary to narrow accounts of culture and security in Southeast Asia, the ASEAN Way may increasingly prove crucial in providing globally-significant insights.

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