

Opinion – ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus, but with Women, Peace and Security?

Written by Peixuan Xie

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PEIXUAN XIE, MAR 5 2025

The 2021 Five Point-Consensus (5PC), underpinned by key points of cessation of violence, constructive dialogue, ASEAN-facilitated mediation and humanitarian assistance, and special envoy visits, remains foundational to ASEAN's proposed solution to the crisis in Myanmar since its military junta staged a coup in February 2021. Nonetheless, with only dormant implementation, some legitimacy-lending acknowledgement of the junta regime, and increasing disconnect to popular demands of Myanmar's people, criticism of the Five PC holds that it is losing critical, if not total, relevance in face of rapidly changing landscape of insurgency and resistance in the country. Civil society organisations spotlight in particular how the 5PC failed to address the rampant gender-based military atrocities and to recognise women as vital contributors to peace and democracy in Myanmar, a finding echoed by reporting of the Special Rapporteur on Myanmar, Tom Andrews, on gendered impacts of the coup.

The disconnect between ASEAN's Myanmar priorities and its up-and-coming gender strategy in peace and security governance, primarily based on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, is curious. The past decade witnessed ASEAN's firming openness to interacting with the UNSC Resolution 1325 on WPS and the ensuing WPS agenda, an emerging body of norms aiming to integrate gender in all aspects related to peace and security, with its pillars in prevention of violence and violations of women's human rights, participation in all peace processes as well as women's representation in formal and informal decision-making at all levels, protection from violence and abuse of women's human rights, and women's equal access to aid distribution mechanisms and services in relief and recovery.

Coherent with its making WPS a priority area of cooperation, in 2022 ASEAN adopted a Regional Plan of Action on WPS (RPA), marking the participation of a third regional entity, after NATO and EU, in the process. Other high-level commitments include the ASEAN High-Level Dialogue to Advance the Implementation of the Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security, regional WPS study, budgeting and implementation guidelines, establishment of a designated WPS knowledge hub, and integration into ASEAN trainings. WPS also increasingly appears as an important agenda for ASEAN's diplomatic engagement with regional and international actors. Among ASEAN member states, the Philippines, Indonesia, and most recently Vietnam, have developed WPS NAPs. Malaysia, the 2025 chairman, also indicated an interest in advancing WPS.

Criticisms of the WPS agenda itself for being washed down from feminist peace to "making war safer for women" and of ASEAN's instrumentalization of 'gender and security' to 'women and development' notwithstanding, critical opportunities exist to apply ASEAN's WPS strategy to its conflict resolution and peacebuilding, especially when the RPA repeatedly pledged to bridge WPS implementation to regional peace and security priorities as a multilateral and cross-sectoral collaboration process.

Now that Myanmar is a regional priority, leveraging ASEAN's commitment to gender and security strategically for Myanmar-related agendas, most remarkably the 5PC and Troika mechanism, could mean more inclusive, constructive, and actionable processes for all five key points. Then why is WPS, gender, or even 'women and girls', completely missing from the 5PC or other crucial decisions on Myanmar? ASEAN's founding principle of non-interference and instrumentalist interpretation of women's rights and gender equality in socio-economic dimensions

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could lend to explanations.

The non-interference tenet sets the boundary between ASEAN collective deliberations and 'internal affairs' of member states, which has been so far pronounced in ASEAN's approach to Myanmar. Coupled with the constructed connections between gender affairs and national representation or domestic affairs prevalent in many ASEAN countries, violence against women as a weapon of civil conflict in Myanmar is a grotesque human rights violation but nonetheless limited within the domestic affairs sphere.

The socio-economic and non-traditional security approach to gender and subsequently to WPS poses the second barrier to engaging ASEAN's existing WPS commitments for Myanmar. The interpretation of women's rights, protection and security in socio-economic dimensions is welcomed as it expands the narrow definition of violence and insecurity, but these issues should not be confined as socio-economic and excluded from political and strategic affairs.

However, being a regional plan that extends gender-responsive provisions to countries and populations across ASEAN through inter-governmental cooperation, the RPA has its advantageous status as readily consensus-based, another important cornerstone of ASEAN's decision-making. And this consensus is important that even within national boundaries, gender, peace, and security are issues with regional implications that all members have a stake in, a similar grounding to Myanmar stability being crucial to regional stability.

Building upon these barriers and opportunities within ASEAN institutionally, what could the promises on gender bring to a solution for Myanmar? Most importantly, mobilising the regional action plan and a global momentum for WPS opens an additional channel to talk and act on the situation in Myanmar in the region and other multilateral fora that WPS is discussed, for greater humanitarian assistance, protection, visibility and accountability, and meaningful participation of civil society actors.

The pillars of Protection and Relief & Recovery can be leveraged for focused discussions and planning for protection from sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and provision of needs-specific humanitarian assistance to women and girls/men and boys (ASEAN's gender discourse has yet recognised nonbinary genders) of different age, location, vulnerability, and socio-political role, all within the 5PC framework with its explicit designation for the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) to deliver aid.

Indeed, AHA Centre might be the only body allowed in officially, but it needs not to be stand-alone in assistance planning when ASEAN has also other dedicated institutions, such as the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) and the ASEAN Health Cluster (AHC), for coordinating inclusive food and medical assistance. Broadening the participation of devising bodies for Myanmar-oriented aid also means more platforms for individual institutions and member states with relevant gender and WPS expertise to contribute financially or technically, and for civil society actors with rapport with these bodies and supporting states to shed light on on-the-ground needs and expectations. Building on an increasingly amplified global discussion on WPS and disarmament, engaging the WPS agenda could also be an effective tool for willing member states to call for intra-ASEAN action for arms embargo and elimination of financial services that economically fuel the military regime, at least strategically in the name of curbing violence against women, children, and other vulnerable populations.

If ASEAN is to take a more active role in paving the way for post-military dialogue and restoring stability in the country, the pillars of participation and prevention in the WPS RPA could become significant.

ASEAN's Joint Statement to promote WPS called upon all member states to "encourage the integration of gender perspectives in all conflict prevention initiatives and strategies and ensure the full participation of women in peace processes, such as conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation processes". If the 5PC is to genuinely pick up on that commitment, its designations on mediation and dialogue need to ensure the representation of women's rights and justice from all relevant parties and gender-specific considerations. With this deliberation, when chairing or interested member states enter communications with different stakeholders in Myanmar's civil conflict bilaterally or through ASEAN, protection and gender-responsive humanitarian assistance for now as well as

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gendered visions of peace, security, and justice for the future are constructive issues that opposition, ethnic and grassroots actors across conflict-affected regions would have the capacity to work on. The appointed Special Envoy as the focal point with different Myanmar actors should consider dedicated and meaningful consultations with feminist activists, women's groups and gender-focused civil society and aid actors across ethno-religious lines.

Myanmar could be a testing ground for ASEAN's WPS commitments and capacity within the defined boundaries of non-interference and consensus, not only for bringing life to the 5PC dormancy but also trialling the 'ASEAN-way' of doing gender and non-traditional security. Strategic engagement from a WPS angle with influential ASEAN and regional actors with existing interactions or acceptance for the gender and security agenda for Myanmar is a pathway to demonstrating ASEAN resolution and reaffirming discourse localisation leadership and agency. And what if, with a consensus-based WPS plan, greater consistency on Myanmar and inter-stake check and balance can be stricken?

ASEAN member states host an increasingly vibrant CSO network working on gender, humanitarian action and human security as vocal advocates, first responders, and defenders, often employing the WPS as a critical international and ASEAN tool to call for action and accountability in regional humanitarian affairs. The RPA's determination to engage with civilian society actors now presents an opportune moment for bridging the sector with some level of ASEAN decision-making, specifically through WPS-based networking and collaborative advocacy. If ASEAN and member states are to keep Myanmar visible in a global agenda amid far-reaching aid ebbs from US and European institutional donors, a collaborative platform with CSOs could supplement its transversally international and local nature and wider rhetorical acknowledgement.

As Myanmar's civil war enters a fourth year, and ASEAN member states review the 5PC, innovative, inclusive ways to accountability need to be considered for moving the agenda and implementation forward. The WPS agenda is admittedly discounted from its progressive feminist genesis, but it is one with institutional endorsement and civil society engagement. It opens some initial doors. There are strategic and discursive benefits for ASEAN to integrate its WPS apparatus in facilitating the Myanmar solution—it honours ASEAN's promise of women's protection and participation in political and security spheres, hones its 'women and gender' reputation, and sustains ASEAN decision-making with specialised civil society expertise while avoiding having to challenge the regional entity's founding principles—and for people in need across Myanmar, be it concrete cross-border assistance or the continued talks of their struggle.

About the author:

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