Framing Inclusive Peace: ASEAN Soft Power Strategy in the Women, Peace and Security Agenda (2017–2023)

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ABSTRACT

Starting in 2017, ASEAN began to raise the agenda of Women, Peace and Security (WPS) as part of diplomatic efforts that uphold global values. The study examines how ASEAN builds a strategic approach to WPS through the process of formulating problems, finding root causes, and developing normative responses. The study refers to important ASEAN policy documents for the period 2017–2021. The process illustrates how global norms are absorbed and adapted to the regional context to build ASEAN's image as a peaceful and inclusive region, in line with SDG 5 and SDG 16 targets. The research aims to analyze how ASEAN frames the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda as part of the region's soft power strategy during 2017-2021. Using a qualitative descriptive method, this research uses secondary data-based sources such as official ASEAN documents, cooperation reports with UN Women, and regional forums. This study contributes to filling the gap in research related to the role of ASEAN value diplomacy in building an inclusive and peaceful regional image.

Keywords: ASEAN, Women Peace and Security, soft power, norm localization, regional diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

Conflict and insecurity around the world disproportionately impact women and vulnerable groups. Women often experience a double disadvantage: being direct victims of violence and being excluded from decision-making processes in peacebuilding. Since the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in 2000, the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda has emerged as a global normative framework with four main pillars: participation, protection, prevention, and post-conflict recovery. This agenda intersects with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions (ASEAN & UN Women, 2022).

In Southeast Asia, ASEAN's commitment to WPS began with the 2017 Joint Statement on Promoting WPS, which marked a milestone in collective recognition of the importance of a gender perspective in peace and security issues (ASEAN & UN Women, 2022). This commitment was reinforced in 2021 with the launch of the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on WPS (RPA-WPS), which emerged as a key recommendation of the ASEAN–UN Women regional study and was supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and UN Women (ASEAN & UN Women, 2022). This document establishes the principles of cross-pillar integration and gender-responsive

peacebuilding as implementation guidelines and serves as an instrument for building ASEAN's image as a peaceful and inclusive region in the eyes of the world.

However, there is a gap between the ideal conditions and the reality on the ground. Normatively, the RPA-WPS targets the integration of the WPS agenda into national and regional policies, strengthening gender-responsive institutional capacity and active civil society participation (ASEAN & UN Women, 2022). In reality, not all member states have a National Action Plan (NAP) for WPS, institutional capacity and funding vary, monitoring indicators are limited, and policy narratives tend to be elitist, thus underrepresenting grassroots aspirations (OSF & UN Women, 2024). UN Women's support including in Indonesia through collaboration with the Norwegian Government for the development and implementation of the NAP, demonstrates the role of international actors in strengthening normative diplomacy in the region (UN Women, 2024).

Building on existing discussions on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in Southeast Asia, this paper argues that ASEAN frames WPS not merely as a gender mainstreaming initiative, but as a soft power strategy instrument to build a peaceful, inclusive, and normatively aligned regional image with global standards. In contrast to previous research that tends to highlight implementation between member states, this research views ASEAN as a collective actor in regional diplomacy, where the framing of strategies through narratives, symbols, and value integration has a dual function, namely strengthening internal cohesion while shaping an external image. By utilize Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), Soft Power Theory (Nye, 2004), and the concept of norm diffusion and localization (Acharya, 2004), this paper aims to analyzes how ASEAN frames the WPS agenda in the 2017–2021 period as part of its soft power regional strategy.

This analysis specifically focuses on: (1) identifying the oldest framing devices narratives, symbolic references, and value associations—in ASEAN official documents and forums related to WPS; (2) assessing the extent to which these framings align with SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions); and (3) examining the contribution of these framings to ASEAN's diplomatic position as a cohesive, gender responsive, and peace oriented regional actor. Thus, this study offers a descriptive-analytical perspective, with secondary data from official ASEAN documents, ASEAN–UN Women reports, and regional forum record, that are focusing on the communicative and normative functions of diplomacy which in turn help explain how ASEAN's framing strategies shape both internal perceptions and the region's external image.

METHODS

1. **Framing Analysis Framework**

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with the aim of understanding how ASEAN frames the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda as part of its regional soft power strategy for the 2017–2021 period. This approach was chosen because the issues studied emphasize the analysis of meaning, narratives, and symbols in diplomatic

documents and practices, rather than quantitative measurements. Thus, the method used allows researchers to examine the normative processes and communication of ASEAN diplomacy in positioning WPS as an instrument for building an inclusive and peaceful regional image. The use of a conceptual framework is considered relevant, given ASEAN's role as a regional actor that not only produces policies but also narratives that shape international public perception. Framing analysis allows to see how ASEAN constructs its image as an inclusive and peaceful community. Thus, the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda is positioned not merely as a technical policy, but as a form of regional legitimacy that strengthens soft power.

2. Soft Power Analytical Lens

Soft Power Theory by Josep Nye (Nye, 2004) defines soft power as the ability of actors to attract and persuade others through attraction, values, or other policies rather than using coercive power, which is considered traditional. In the ASEAN context, the study analyzes Woman, Peace, and Security as one of the soft power efforts that serves to build legitimacy across regional borders. ASEAN seeks to portray the intergovernmental organization as a region committed to international norms, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals in the movement for gender equality. Soft power can be strengthened through ASEAN's collaboration with international partners such as UN Women and USAID, which not only provide technical support but also expand the reach of ASEAN's normative diplomacy at the global level. Analysis using a soft power lens can measure the extent to which the framing of Woman, Peace, and Security has functioned as an effort by ASEAN to improve its diplomatic standing both internally among member states and externally with global partners.

3. Norm Localization Framework

The third framework used is the concept of Norm Localization (Acharya, 2004). This framework emphasizes that global norms are not blindly adopted but rather localized to align with local values, practices, and principles. In this study, the concept of norm localization is used to analyze how ASEAN interprets global norms such as UNSCR 1325 and SDGs 5 & 16 through regional local wisdom, such as the principles of consensus, non-intervention, and The ASEAN Way. This localization process is important because it determines the extent to which global norms are accepted and internalized by ASEAN member states. Using this framework, this study attempts to demonstrate that ASEAN is not simply a "follower" of global norms, but also a normative actor actively reshaping international values to suit the Southeast Asian context. This distinguishes ASEAN from other regional actors, such as the European Union, which places greater emphasis on formal legal instruments in internalizing global norms.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

This research is qualitative and descriptive, utilizing secondary data. Primary sources consist of official ASEAN documents, cooperation reports with UN Women, academic publications, and reports from international organizations. Data were collected through

a literature review, emphasizing credibility, relevance, and direct relevance to the ASEAN WPS agenda for the 2017–2021 period. The analysis was conducted using a theory-based, qualitative, and unbiased analysis approach. Each document was examined using Entman's (1993) framing device, then connected with Nye's (2004) soft power lens, and interpreted within Acharya's (2004) norm localization framework. Triangulation between sources was conducted to enhance the validity of the findings, while consistency of the analysis was maintained through discussions between the authors.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Overview of ASEAN's Women, Peace, and Security

Between 2017 and 2022, ASEAN has shown significant progress in developing the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, as evidenced by an analysis of ASEAN documents. This agenda initiative began with the Joint Statement on Promoting Women, Peace, and Security in ASEAN (2017), which was ASEAN's first collective commitment to integrating a gender perspective into peace and security issues. To sustain this momentum, ASEAN organized a series of activities, such as the establishment of the ASEAN Women for Peace Registry (2018), the Regional Symposium (2019), and the establishment of the Southeast Asia Network of Women Peace Negotiators and Mediators and the Ministerial Dialogue (2020) (ASEAN & UN Women, 2022). The culmination of this agenda initiative was the ratification of the Regional Plan of Action (RPA) on WPS, agreed upon by ASEAN leaders in 2022. This effort reflects the transformation of the WPS discourse in ASEAN, which is a continued commitment to gender integration within the framework of building peace and maintaining regional security.

2. Framing Devices

To align the WPS agenda with existing ASEAN identity and policies, there are three main elements used in this strategy as described in Entman's (1993) framework:

a. Narrative

The WPS agenda is framed as an important integral part of creating a stable, peaceful, inclusive, and resilient community in accordance with the ASEAN vision. This narrative serves to define the problem (women as a vulnerable group), diagnose the causes (lack of women's participation in peacebuilding), offer solutions (gender mainstreaming), and position women as key actors in maintaining regional stability and security, rather than simply as beneficiaries. Through this narrative, ASEAN uses its soft power to build legitimacy and mainstream WPS as an integral part of its community vision (Nye, 2004).

b. Symbolic References

The WPS agenda is aligned with ASEAN's collective identity through the use of symbolic references such as the term "The ASEAN Way" and the concept of "community building,"

strengthening the legitimacy of WPS as an agenda aligned with local ASEAN values. This concept ensures that WPS is not an external import, but rather part of the region's communal traditions (ASEAN & UN Women, 2022). This reflects the theory of norm localization developed by Acharya (2004), which explains that global norms (such as UNSCR 1325) are adapted through local value frameworks to be accepted by member states.

c. Value Integration

Rather than adopting global norms directly, the value framing of the WPS agenda demonstrates that ASEAN has chosen to adapt global norms to local values and existing regional principles. This is reflected in the context of UN SCR 1325 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are internalized through the principles of non-intervention and local context. This process aligns with Finnemore & Sikkink's (1998) norm diffusion theory, which emphasizes that global norms can be effectively accepted if they are adapted to local political and institutional conditions. Thus, ASEAN has successfully positioned WPS not as an externally imposed agenda, but as a norm resulting from adaptation to the region's unique diplomatic culture.

3. Linkage to the SDGs

a. SDG 5 (Gender Equality)

The framing of WPS in ASEAN demonstrates a close link to promoting gender equality goals, as evidenced by the responses given to address challenges in the ASEAN region. In Southeast Asia, WPS issues have strong relevance to the role of women in the political sphere, including in electoral processes and peacebuilding, as well as in addressing extremism, transnational crime, communal conflict, climate change, natural disasters, and health crises. The "ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security" report (ASEAN & UN Women, 2022) found that women's participation in peace and security processes remains limited and recommended increasing women's participation in decision-making, resolution, and post-conflict rehabilitation. These recommendations later became the core of the Regional Plan of Action (RPA) on WPS adopted in 2022 (ASEAN & UN Women, 2022). The process of developing the RPA-WPS, as documented in " The making of the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security: Insights and lessons learned" (ASEAN & UN Women, 2023), demonstrates that input from various stakeholders has been mainstreamed into the RPA framework. Thus, the RPA-WPS positions the WPS agenda as a strategic instrument to achieve SDG 5 targets at the regional level.

b. SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions)

In addition to focusing on gender equality, ASEAN's WPS framing also emphasizes strengthening institutions and stability. This aligns with SDG 16, which aims to build effective and inclusive institutions. The WPS RPA targets gender-responsive institution-building as part of a strategy to build resilient communities, as outlined in the 2021 ASEAN report "The Women, Peace, and Security Agenda in ASEAN." Furthermore, the

integration of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) pillar into the WPS agenda further strengthens the desire to support women's participation in strategic prevention measures, efforts to build resilient communities, and effective post-war disaster recovery (ASEAN & UN Women, 2022). Therefore, WPS serves not only as a bridge to achieving SDG 16's target on effective development and governance in the region.

4.   The Dual Function of Framing

Since 2017, the WPS agenda in ASEAN has served not only as a technical policy but also as a framing strategy with a dual function. Within the region, WPS serves as a medium to strengthen a sense of togetherness. ASEAN emphasizes that gender and peace issues are not merely domestic matters but rather part of the identity of the "ASEAN Community." Through the principle of cross-pillar integration, WPS is positioned as a collective agenda so that even if only some countries have National Action Plans (NAPs), others still feel part of a shared commitment (ASEAN & UN Women, 2022). In other words, this framing helps maintain solidarity amid differences in implementation capacity among members.

Outside the region, WPS framing functions as a soft power instrument. ASEAN seeks to portray itself as a peaceful, inclusive, and gender-responsive region an image that aligns with SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 16 on peace and institutions. Such a narrative is also deliberately aimed at strengthening ASEAN's standing with external partners, such as the UN, the European Union, and Australia. The strategic cooperation presented in official documents demonstrates that ASEAN seeks to be seen not merely as a follower of global norms, but as an actor capable of articulating global values in its own regional language (ASEAN & UN Women, 2022).

5. ASEAN as an Actor in Normative Diplomacy

The framing of WPS also demonstrates ASEAN's role as an actor in normative diplomacy. The process involves not simply adopting global norms but adapting them to the Southeast Asian context. Acharya (Acharya, 2004) describes this process as norm localization, where local values adapt to international norms to achieve acceptance. This is evident in the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on WPS, which links the four pillars of WPS with the principles of The ASEAN Way, such as consensus, non-interference, and community-building (ASEAN & UN Women, 2022). In this way, ASEAN acts as a bridge between global and regional norms. Rather than simply adopting values such as UNSCR 1325 and the SDGs, ASEAN adapted them to the realities of the Southeast Asian region and reintroduced them through regional forums and external partnerships. This strategy emphasizes ASEAN's active role in shaping the meaning of norms consistent with its collective identity.

6.   Additional Discussion

However, several limitations are worth noting. First, the implementation gap between member states remains large. Only a small number have WPS NAPs, while most do not yet have similar mechanisms (ASEAN & UN Women, 2022). Second, the indicators used

to monitor WPS are still limited, making it difficult to measure the real impact on peace and security policies (ASEAN & UN Women, 2022). Third, the WPS agenda remains elite-dominated, with relatively weak grassroots participation (ASEAN & UN Women, 2022). This creates a gap between symbolism at the regional level and practice on the ground.

When compared with the European Union, the differences in approach are clear. George and Shepherd (2016) show that the EU integrated UNSCR 1325 into its foreign policy through a more binding legal instrument. ASEAN, on the other hand, was more cautious and relied on consensus. This approach is indeed slower but reflects ASEAN's unique characteristic: its ability to incorporate global norms without incurring domestic resistance, albeit more gradually. In other words, ASEAN's strategy in framing the WPS demonstrates normative diplomacy that is not as strong as the EU's in legal terms but still serves as an instrument of regional legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

A study of ASEAN's Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda for the 2017-2021 period reveals a unique strategic approach to adopting global norms. Through a comprehensive framing process, the regional organization successfully transformed norms such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the SDGs targets into diplomatic instruments aligned with "The ASEAN Way". Key findings demonstrate that ASEAN's framing strategy has dual, mutually reinforcing characteristics. Internally, the WPS framing serves as a glue for regional solidarity, enabling member states with varying capacities to remain bound by shared commitments. Externally, the WPS agenda serves as a soft power tool, projecting ASEAN's image as a peaceful, inclusive, and gender-responsive region to the international community.

The process of norm localization demonstrates ASEAN's ability to go beyond simply adhering to international standards to adapt them to the Southeast Asian context. The integration of the values of consensus, non-interference, and community-building into the WPS framework demonstrates ASEAN's ability to be an active normative actor in regional diplomacy. Contributions to the achievement of SDGs 5 and 16 are realized through strategic collaborations with global partners such as UN Women and USAID. The partnership provides technical support and extends the reach of ASEAN's normative diplomacy to the global level. However, the implementation of the WPS agenda still faces significant challenges. Disparities in capacity among member states create a real implementation gap. Only a small number of countries have WPS National Action Plans (NAPs), while monitoring mechanisms remain limited.

Furthermore, the policy narrative tends to be elitist and does not optimally engage grassroots civil society participation. A comparison with the European Union's approach shows that ASEAN has chosen a more cautious path, relying on consensus rather than binding legal instruments. Although this approach is relatively slower, it reflects ASEAN's unique characteristics in incorporating global norms without triggering significant domestic resistance. Overall, ASEAN has demonstrated innovation in utilizing WPS as an instrument for strengthening internal cohesion and enhancing soft power capacity.

Success lies in the organization's ability to adapt global norms to the political and institutional realities of the Southeast Asian region. However, the main challenge going forward is bridging regional commitments with community-level implementation to ensure a more concrete impact on regional peace and security

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