

Securing Women's Peace

A Political Economy Analysis of Women, Peace and Security
in ASEAN, Cambodia, Lao PDR, and the Philippines



Seller in Monduliri, Cambodia. Photo credit: AMPLIFY, June 2025.

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¹ www.asiafoundation.org/amplify

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Acronyms

ACW — ASEAN Committee on Women

ACWC — ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children

ASEAN-IPR — ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation

AWPR — ASEAN Women for Peace Registry

BARM — Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao

CEDAW — Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

CPP — Cambodian People's Party

CPP-NPA — Communist Party of the Philippines — New People's Army

CSO — Civil Society Organization

ECCC — Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia

FDI — Foreign Direct Investment

GAD — Gender and Development Fund

GBV — Gender-Based Violence

INGO — International Non-Governmental Organization

LPRP — Lao People's Revolutionary Party

LWU — Lao Women's Union

NAP — National Action Plan

OPAPRU — Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity

PEA — Political Economy Analysis

PEGD — Poverty Eradication and Gender Division (of ASEAN Secretariat)

RPA-WPS — Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security

SEZ — Special Economic Zone

TAF — The Asia Foundation

WPS — Women, Peace and Security

Executive Summary

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in Southeast Asia is practiced in ways that reflect both international commitments and highly localized understandings of peace, gender, and security. While formal adoption of WPS frameworks is gaining traction across the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and some of its member states, implementation is shaped by local political systems, histories of conflict, development priorities, and often deeply embedded social norms. As such, WPS in the region is not a single, uniform concept, but a set of ideas, norms, and practices that must be interpreted through an understanding of local political economies.

Across the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Cambodia, and the Philippines, as well as at a regional ASEAN level, WPS efforts, while driven by broad gender equality and development frameworks, are constrained in different ways. At the ASEAN level, the adoption of a Regional Plan of Action on WPS in 2022 marked an important milestone. Yet within ASEAN, WPS tends to be deprioritized as a “gender issue,” while topics around armed conflict are often avoided due to political sensitivities. This has implications for how WPS is promoted within the regional bloc.

In Laos, the agenda is largely unfamiliar. Where it is progressed, it is often deemed politically sensitive due to a preference for a framing of stability over security. Activities aligning with WPS, like countering trafficking in persons, disaster resilience, and migration, are therefore often undertaken without explicit reference to WPS goals. In Cambodia, there is high-level government and civil society interest in WPS, but the centrality of “peace” in the agenda makes it a contested concept, in a context where “peace” can have different interpretations by different actors. The Philippines stands out as a regional leader, having institutionalized WPS through four generations of national action plans and subnational frameworks in the Bangsamoro region. Yet even there, implementation is uneven and can be constrained by patriarchal norms and selective political will.

Key WPS actors vary across settings. In Laos and Cambodia, women's organizations and ministries of women's affairs tend to steer WPS initiatives at a governmental level. In the Philippines, civil society has been instrumental in shaping the agenda, with local women's networks playing key roles in postconflict governance and peace monitoring. Within ASEAN, WPS is overseen through sectoral bodies like the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children and the ASEAN Committee on Women, and WPS is promoted by the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation, but the effectiveness of these agencies is limited by a culture of consensus-based diplomacy and the lack of enforcement mechanisms. Across all sites, international donors remain central to sustaining WPS programming, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of the agenda without external support.

This report uses a political economy approach to analyze the structures, interests, relationships, and power dynamics that shape WPS implementation, drawing on The Asia Foundation's **Practical Guide to Political Economy Analysis**. It finds that formal frameworks — such as ASEAN's Regional Plan of Action on WPS or the Philippines' Magna Carta of Women — are necessary but insufficient to understand the existing and future implementation of WPS. Informal norms like social and gender norms, bureaucratic politics, historical narratives of war and peace, and relationships of power between stakeholders all exert influence over what WPS means in practice in each context.

While WPS as a framework must be carefully programmed to avoid confrontation with entrenched power structures that can thwart it from the beginning, it offers strategic footholds for gendered peacebuilding when it is grounded in locally meaningful concepts for communities and governments. The report identifies locally grounded pathways forward to navigate this tension, to strengthen WPS within each country context, and offers some recommendations for the region.

Including women in peace and security governance, planning, and implementation is crucial for ensuring that Southeast Asian nations can respond to security threats in a way that accounts for the needs of all members of society. Similarly, supporting women's leadership in peace and security is key to building a more inclusive society and preventing future conflict in the region. To be effective in Southeast Asia, WPS efforts must:

- **Look beyond the formal frameworks and actors** and embrace the informal drivers of power and change. These will vary country to country.
- **Support and fund women's groups already advancing WPS-aligned objectives**, even when they don't use WPS language.
- **Be open to working outside of WPS normative language** to reach agenda goals, understanding that WPS language can potentially be limiting in some contexts. This should not require compromising on the *spirit* of WPS goals but may mean that the form that it takes is specific rather than universal.
- **Identify spaces in which transformative practices** at the local level align with national political narratives and leverage them to advance WPS.
- **Employ issue-based approaches** that link WPS to locally resonant priorities like disaster resilience, safe migration, or social stability and work with the grain to pursue change.
- **Use ASEAN frameworks to build momentum** but place primary emphasis on enabling work that is already underway at local and grassroots levels.



Women's leadership in the Transforming WPS Learning into Action Workshop. Photo credit: AMPLIFY, December 2024.

Introduction and Methods

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is a global policy framework that recognizes the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls and the critical role women play in preventing conflict, building peace, and promoting security. It was established through United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) and subsequent resolutions, which call for women's full, equal and meaningful participation in all aspects of peace and security, from conflict prevention and resolution to peacekeeping, humanitarian response, and postconflict recovery (Cohn, Kinsella, and Gibbings 2004; Davies and True 2019; Anderlini 2019).

While global in origin, the agenda is intended to be responsive to local and national contexts and is increasingly being applied beyond traditional conflict settings to include issues like disaster response, climate security, and violent extremism.

Across Southeast Asia, the WPS agenda has taken root in diverse and uneven ways, shaped by each country's political economy, histories of conflict, development trajectories, and gender norms. Although the WPS agenda is often framed globally through the lens of armed conflict and postconflict reconstruction, in Southeast Asia it intersects with a broader set of nontraditional security concerns — ranging from climate change, disaster resilience, trafficking

in persons, and countering violent extremism, as well as countering gender inequality in the peace and security institutions that address these risks. While ASEAN has adopted a Regional Plan of Action on WPS (RPA-WPS) and many member states have taken steps to integrate WPS into domestic policies, the agenda remains subject to significant contextual variation and constraints.

This report examines how the WPS agenda is understood, practiced, and navigated across four contexts: ASEAN as a regional body, and the country contexts of Lao PDR, Cambodia, and the Philippines. It investigates the formal and informal institutions that shape WPS implementation, the contextual features that influence uptake, and the dynamics among key actors. **This analysis focuses on how WPS is experienced and interpreted locally by government actors, civil society organizations (CSOs), and regional bodies. In so doing, it surfaces the tensions, opportunities, and creative adaptations that characterize WPS implementation across a politically diverse setting such as Southeast Asia.**

Despite differing levels of state capacity, civil society engagement, and openness to gender frameworks, all four cases reveal local efforts that align with WPS principles. Some countries, such as the Philippines, have developed sophisticated frameworks and institutional architecture that specifically reference WPS. Others, like Laos, approach WPS more cautiously, linking it more with stability than security. Meanwhile, ASEAN as a regional body has increasingly recognized WPS, including through its production of the RPA-WPS, albeit through a lens of nontraditional security and consensus-based diplomacy that can constrain a more transformative agenda. ASEAN's role in WPS differs from that of states, given its status as a regional body with different mandates, resourcing, and enforcement powers for WPS. Nevertheless, it continues to play a key role in agenda setting and opening political spaces for regional dialogue on WPS that influences its member states, including those assessed in this analysis.

By adopting a political economy lens, this report sheds light on both the structural enablers and the everyday constraints that shape the WPS ecosystem in these contexts. It seeks to inform more contextually grounded, politically feasible strategies for advancing gender-inclusive peace and security in Southeast Asia.

This report explores how foundational features, institutions, and actors’ interests combine to shape the uptake and implementation of the WPS agenda in Lao PDR, Cambodia, the Philippines, and ASEAN (Nixon and Denney 2025). The research was guided by the core components of The Asia Foundation’s Political Economy Analysis (PEA) framework. These include analyzing and understanding the:

- 1. Foundational Features** (sometimes called structures or structural features). These are defined as the long-standing contextual features that shape a country’s social and political environment. They change very slowly, if at all, and therefore usually provide the backdrop against which reform takes place.
- 2. The “Rules of the Game,”** both formal and informal. These are the rules that organize social, political, and economic relations, and can include both formal, visible institutions like laws and informal social rules such as gender norms. While not always the case, rules are often constraining but can, in some cases, support reform.
- 3. Stakeholders and Power** — all of those with a “stake” of some kind in the issue, sector, or context being analyzed and the differing levels and kinds of power they have to create or enable change.

Figure 1: The TAF PEA Framework (Nixon and Denney 2025)

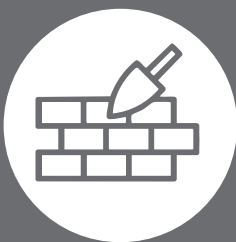


The remainder of the report is structured as follows for each country. Section 1 examines how WPS is understood and practiced in each context. Section 2 outlines the contextual features shaping this engagement. Section 3 explores the formal and informal rules that condition WPS uptake. Section 4 maps the actors, power dynamics, and interests involved in advancing or resisting WPS. Section 5 offers some recommendations per country. Finally, a conclusion is offered with some takeaways for the whole region.



ASEAN

- How WPS is Understood and Practiced in ASEAN
- Foundational Features and Formal and Informal Rules and Norms Shaping WPS in ASEAN
- Stakeholders and Power in ASEAN
- Recommendations



ASEAN

How WPS is Understood and Practiced in ASEAN

The WPS agenda in the ASEAN region has experienced a flurry of activity over the past five years, with growing recognition and buy-in across regional bodies and member states: the Philippines has launched its fourth national action plan, Indonesia its second, Vietnam and Thailand their first, while Cambodia and Malaysia have committed to developing their own plans. Several ASEAN Member States have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and established national mechanisms to address women's issues (Veneracion 2023). One key formal mechanism to improve WPS in ASEAN is the ASEAN RPA-WPS, adopted in 2022, which demonstrates a formal acknowledgement that WPS is applicable to regional security issues (ASEAN Secretariat 2022). Today, WPS activity is occurring across different sectoral bodies in ASEAN, with one participant commenting that WPS has “become about 75 percent of our work recently” (Interview with ASEAN representative, April 2025), highlighting a strong trend toward institutional engagement with the agenda. All those interviewed for this research agreed that WPS is a trending topic of interest for ASEAN currently across a variety of actors, demonstrating a period of momentum for WPS in the region.

“WPS is still largely seen as a gender agenda. ... WPS hasn't been fully mainstreamed across the security sector yet. It is there in strategy documents, but in practice, security actors are not consistently involved.”

WPS remains framed as a gender agenda, as opposed to a security or cross-cutting agenda. One person commented that, “WPS is still largely seen as a gender agenda. ... WPS hasn't been fully mainstreamed across the security sector yet. It is there in strategy documents, but in practice, security actors are not consistently involved” (Interview with ASEAN representative, April 2025). Other stakeholders agreed with this position, suggesting that while WPS has visible engagement by the ASEAN Committee on Women and the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children, buy-in from traditional security and defense sectors remains cautious and aloof (Interviews with ASEAN representatives, April 2025).

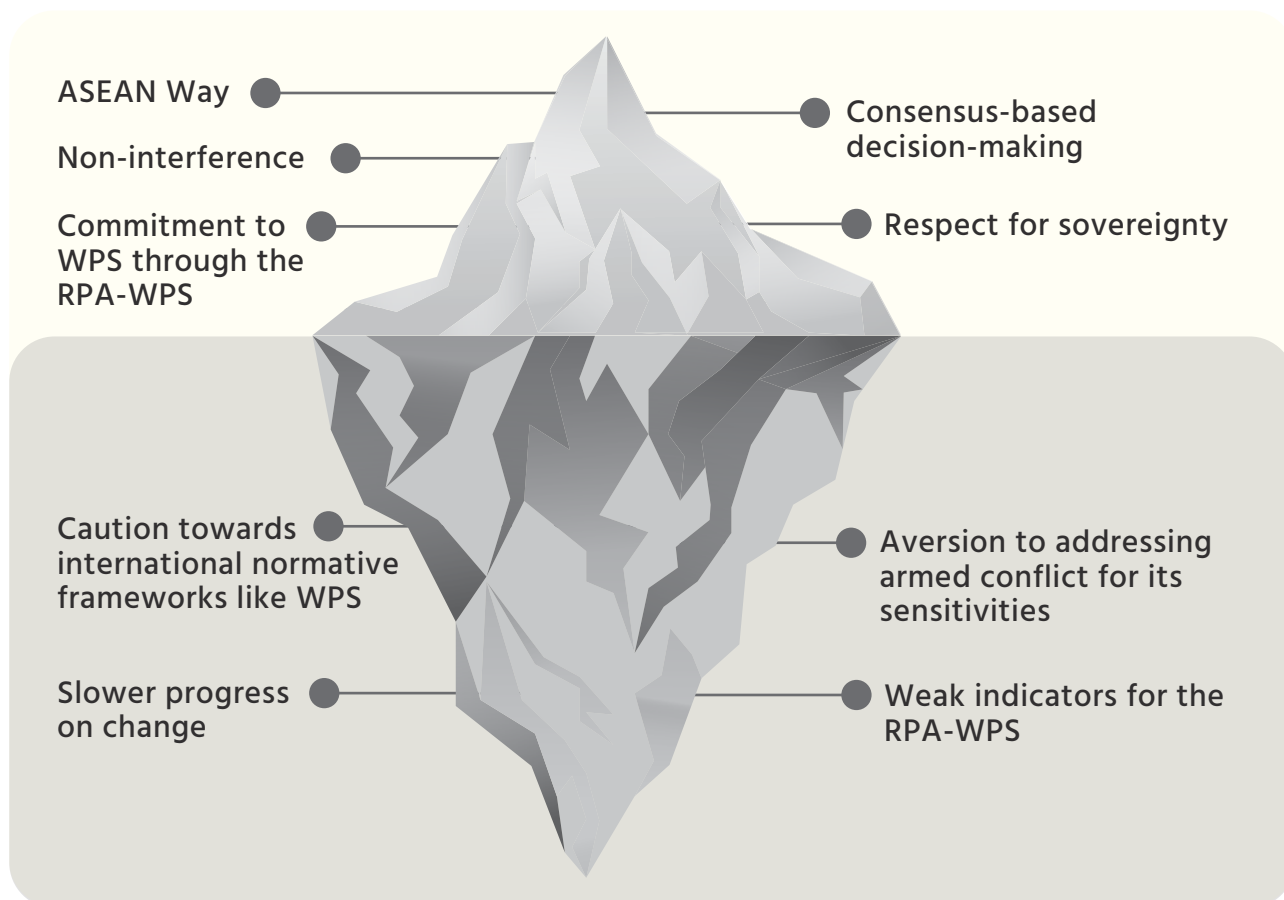


Cambodia CSO representative at the 3rd ASEAN Women Leader's Summit. Photo credit: AMPLIFY, August 2024.

Regional security issues identified in relation to WPS are typically framed through the lens of nontraditional security issues, with problems surrounding armed conflict carefully avoided, aligning with a trend within ASEAN's handling of security issues more broadly (ASEAN Secretariat 2022; Martel, Mustapha, and Sharma 2022). One participant echoed this dynamic, mentioning that "We don't have a problem saying 'conflict,' but we avoid acknowledging it exists in the region" (Interview with ASEAN representative, April 2025). Nontraditional security challenges largely include human trafficking, violent extremism, disaster management, and pandemics.

The framing of WPS within nontraditional security has allowed ASEAN to navigate potentially sensitive issues among ASEAN member states (AMS). As such, the WPS agenda becomes more palatable to member state governments, which may resist discourses that imply large-scale conflict or human rights abuses within their territories (Martel, Mustapha, and Sharma 2022). Similarly, WPS framings at an ASEAN level align nicely with ASEAN's inclusive "security" approaches and its broader commitments to gender equality, including the ASEAN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and the subsequent regional plan of action (Martel et al 2022).

Figure 2: An Iceberg of ASEAN



Foundational Features and Formal and Informal Rules and Norms Shaping WPS in ASEAN

ASEAN's principle of non-interference and culture of consensus-building defines how it engages with WPS across sectors. This strategic position, known as the "ASEAN Way," emphasizes the concept of sovereignty for ASEAN member states, with efforts made to ensure that no individual member state perceives ASEAN decision-making as impinging on its national autonomy (Acharya 2004; Lee-Koo and Trojanowska 2017). While this rule provides the basis for effective collaboration across the 10 countries in many cases, it can make it challenging for ASEAN to adopt human rights or gender equality agendas perceived as being "external" or derived from Western norms (Lee-Koo and Trojanowska 2017). There has historically been skepticism toward UN-imposed policies, which are sometimes viewed as threats to regional security rather than opportunities for collaboration (Lee-Koo and Trojanowska 2017; Martel, Mustapha, and Sharma 2022).

“There is always a balancing act — we want to engage with global norms, but we have to frame them in ways that respect sovereignty.”

This sensitivity was acknowledged by those interviewed, with one ASEAN representative saying, “There is always a balancing act — we want to engage with global norms, but we have to frame them in ways that respect sovereignty” (Interview with ASEAN representative, April 2025). Another echoed the statement by sharing, “ASEAN doesn’t like to be seen as [being] dictated to from outside — so WPS has to be contextualized within ASEAN priorities” (Interview with ASEAN representative, April 2025). Some have criticized ASEAN’s non-interventionist position manifests in a lack of intervention in Myanmar to address the security of women and girls during persistent and recent crises, despite its ostensible commitments to WPS (Veneracion 2023). Yet others point out that the WPS framework can be carefully employed to indirectly discuss potentially polarizing issues within ASEAN that relate to WPS and peace and security more broadly. For instance, one participant from ASEAN commented that at times, WPS is seen as a framework through which external actors try to approach ASEAN bodies on Myanmar, without directly confronting the political sensitivities involved (Interview with ASEAN Representative, April 2025).

ASEAN’s commitment to respecting sovereignty and consensus-based processes that have been mutually agreed upon means change is often slow within the regional bloc (Denney et al 2024). While frustrating for some, this incremental approach does mean that change is often more sustainable, with member states having a stronger buy-in for an issue and relationships to accompany their commitments over a longer period (Denney et al 2024). These dynamics are relevant for understanding entry points for more sustainable WPS programming in the regional bloc.

The implementation of the RPA-WPS also faces challenges. One participant described the RPA-WPS as having “lofty goals but weak indicators, which hampers meaningful monitoring and evaluation,” and another reinforced this, observing, “There is no consistent monitoring mechanism, and many member states don’t report regularly” (Interviews with ASEAN representatives and UN Women, April 2025). Political sensitivities around conflict contexts, particularly concerning Myanmar, inhibit robust data collection and make tracking progress difficult (Interview with UN Women, April 2025).

While the state-led and diplomatically cautious approach to WPS can be viewed as a limitation to its transformative potential in ASEAN, nevertheless, the gradual diffusion of WPS in the regional body can still facilitate meaningful change among ASEAN Member States. There are footholds and entry points for WPS to be further institutionalized. As one participant mentioned, “It’s slow, but not impossible” (Interview with ASEAN representative, April 2025).



Stakeholders and Power in ASEAN

The ASEAN Secretariat plays a coordinating but relatively weak role in advancing WPS. Although it facilitates regional processes, it has no enforcement power over member states and operates within ASEAN's principles of consensus and non-interference, as mentioned already. Individual technocrats within the Secretariat, particularly those within the Political-Security Community and Social-Cultural Community, have become important internal advocates for WPS. However, as one UN Women representative noted, "while there are champions inside the Secretariat, without strong member state pressure, progress is slow," indicating a view that it is really the buy-in from ASEAN member states that can move the needle for WPS advancement in the regional bloc (Interview with UN Women, April 2025).

Sectoral bodies within ASEAN vary considerably in their engagement with WPS. The ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) and the ASEAN Committee on Women (ACW) have been the primary champions, actively integrating WPS into regional declarations and frameworks. Under the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, ACWC has been a key promoter of WPS, particularly through its collaborative work in drafting action plans to eliminate violence against women. Its 2016-2020 work plan explicitly references WPS concerns and underscores women's roles in decision-making and governance (Veneracion 2023). The ACW collaborates with ACWC to ensure gender is mainstreamed in ASEAN policies. Research participants shared the view that the influence of ACW and ACWC on the narrative around WPS tends to frame the agenda as a "gender issue" instead of a cross-cutting issue or one that needs to be engaged with by those in security-focused bodies (Interviews with ASEAN representatives, April 2025). However, strategic alignment of WPS with issues that are relevant to security sectors — such as linking WPS to peacekeeping or CVE — seems to be more successful in fostering buy-in from the otherwise potentially aloof players in security and defense (Interviews with ASEAN representatives, April 2025).

External actors, such as donor countries including New Zealand, Australia, the United States, and actors like UN Women, have considerable financial and technical influence on WPS in ASEAN, but this must be sensitively managed so as not to be seen as external interference. A concern about the involvement of international partners in ASEAN is that WPS is "kept alive largely by external partners. Without their support, it may fade" (Interview with UN Women, April 2025). There are concerns among stakeholders interviewed within ASEAN that without donor support, the sustainability of the agenda is a concern beyond 2025 (Interview with ASEAN representatives, April 2025). This is particularly the case after multiple countries have cut their aid budgets.



Lao PDR CSO representatives at the 3rd ASEAN Women Leader's Summit. Photo credit: AMPLIFY, August 2024.

Vibrant actors doing the work to keep the WPS agenda lively and afloat within ASEAN include the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (ASEAN-IPR), which has increased its activity around WPS, including training programs and the mobilization of the ASEAN Women for Peace Registry (AWPR). Nevertheless, ASEAN-IPR operates with a minimal budget and relies heavily on external grants, particularly from international donor partners like UN Women and others (Interview with ASEAN representatives, April 2025).

Finally, civil society should also be mentioned for its involvement in WPS at an ASEAN level. Civil society is central to WPS implementation globally because it often understands local community needs, provides services, and amplifies women's voices in peace processes (Chilmeran 2024; della Valle and Strazzari 2023). However, within ASEAN, it is difficult for both regional and domestic CSOs to influence the process or decision-making, with CSOs often given a "consultative role" (Interview with UN Women, April 2025). Another participant from the ASEAN Secretariat pointed out that "Engaging ASEAN takes a lot of time and resources — it's a labyrinth," and therefore "it's a huge advantage if civil society organizations have a strong relationship with national focal points. When elevated to the ASEAN level, those national contacts can vouch for them." (Interview with ASEAN representatives, April 2025).

"One of the main benefits of civil society's engagement with ASEAN as a bloc is that they can provide data and gender [relevant] information which may not be generated by official government agencies and can spotlight politically sensitive issues that governments may not address directly" (Interview with ASEAN representatives, April 2025). It seems there are several initiatives across ASEAN-IPR and the Poverty Eradication and Gender Division (PEGD) of the ASEAN Secretariat that have acknowledged and identified the important role that civil society can play in advancing WPS both nationally and regionally, and they are actively establishing mechanisms for enhanced input by civil society groups.

Recommendations

- **Institutionalize consultative mechanisms for CSOs.**

Participants identified the value of civil society input into WPS programming and regional initiatives. It appears that there is an appetite among some within ASEAN to provide platforms for knowledge exchange between CSOs. This work should be supported and elevated, given the benefits that civil society brings to building WPS frameworks that are sustainable and long-lasting. Direct funding and technical support to ASEAN-IPR's training programs, including the ASEAN WPS Community of Practice and the ASEAN Women for Peace Registry (AWPR), and promotion of WPS dialogue at the ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC) and the ASEAN People's Forum (APF), will be key regional vehicles for building WPS capacity.

- **Engage ASEAN sectoral bodies on the importance of WPS.**

Engage with sectoral bodies on the relevance of WPS for their work. Institutional coordination to ensure accountability for WP implementation is still lacking in ASEAN, but articulating the benefits of WPS for different ASEAN bodies provides an entry point for the agenda. Workshops, training, and forums are useful in highlighting the benefits of WPS to ASEAN agencies that have shown limited interest and engagement in the agenda. Plan on communicating the benefits of WPS to ASEAN bodies in terms that make sense for them and align with the work they are already conducting. This is especially important for security and defense-oriented agencies.

- **Strategically engage with the Philippines as ASEAN Chair 2026.**

The Philippines has a long history of leadership on WPS and its experience with the agenda makes it an evidence base for other regional players. Its chairmanship of ASEAN in 2026 provides an opportunity for it to further elevate WPS's importance at a regional level as part of its strategic vision for ASEAN. Its leadership could take form in hosting regional dialogues on WPS and support knowledge-exchange opportunities specifically between CSOs, to support the development of regional ecosystems of knowledge exchange and capacity building for WPS.

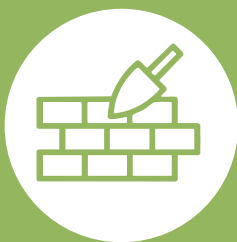
- **Encourage donors to design long-term, locally anchored programming for WPS.**

With WPS still being viewed as a donor-driven agenda, any future support from donors for ASEAN initiatives should focus on how to support sustainable and long-term WPS programming that does not rely on their future input and support. There are opportunities for donors to focus their support on institutional capacity for WPS, supporting initiatives that link civil society with ASEAN sectors and align with national and local funding frameworks that already exist.



Lao PDR

- How WPS is Understood and Practiced in Lao PDR
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- Stakeholders and Power in Lao PDR WPS in Laos
- Recommendations





Lao PDR

How WPS is Understood and Practiced in Lao PDR

In Lao PDR, our research suggests that the WPS agenda is not widely recognized as a distinct or coherent framework. Across stakeholder interviews, there was broad consensus that WPS remains unfamiliar or misunderstood, with many participants unsure about the exact parameters of WPS, although they could see how it might capture existing work being conducted in Laos aimed at gender equality. As one private sector actor explained, “The WPS agenda is a new policy. It is not well known among my circles. However, it is not deemed as irrelevant or “far from us — we just need time to familiarize ourselves with it and break it down to be more practical with on-the-ground issues” (Interview, March 2025). A civil society representative shared that “the term itself is not well known among CSOs; hence, we were just informed [by TAF] that it has been implemented by the UN at the global level and now at the ASEAN regional level” (Interview, March 2025). Others echoed this view, acknowledging that while their activities often support women’s safety, empowerment, and leadership, WPS remains unfamiliar as a programming framework in Laos.

This unfamiliarity is compounded by sensitivities around the language of “security.” Multiple participants noted that the security component of WPS can be delicate, as national security is seen as the purview of the government. For these reasons, it is often avoided. This political sensitivity is also highlighted by the translation of WPS as “peace and stability” rather than “peace and security.” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ translation of WPS as “Women, Peace and Stability” (ແມ່ຍິງ, ສັນຕິພາບ ແລະ ຄວາມໝັ້ນຄົງ) has been adopted by the Lao Women’s Union (LWU). As a government-aligned entity focused on gender equality, the LWU has limited latitude to reinterpret state-defined narratives. One LWU representative acknowledged the

importance of regional frameworks but stressed the need for local adaptation (Interview, April 2025). Another framed the agenda in more general terms, describing it as “a plan that promotes participation by recognizing that sustainable peace must involve the participation of all sectors of society, including men, youths, and others” (Interview, April 2025).

Despite the limited familiarity with the WPS as a policy agenda, many stakeholders are already engaged in work that aligns with some of its core themes. This includes work on preventing gender-based violence, supporting women’s leadership in disaster preparedness, and working on human trafficking in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and overseas, as well as the reintegration of migrant returnees (Interviews with civil society groups, March and April 2025). One participant observed that this work often goes unrecognized as WPS: “The concept or contents are not new, and Laos has been implementing WPS work, but it has not been labelled as such (i.e., GBV, human trafficking)” (Interview with civil society, March 2025).

“The concept or contents are not new, and Laos has been implementing WPS work, but it has not been labelled as such.”



Foundational Features Shaping WPS in Lao PDR

Lao PDR follows a market-oriented economy under socialist governance. The country’s five-year National Socio-Economic Development Plans (NSEDPs) articulate the future development vision, with the 9th NSEDP (2021–2025) prioritizing “ensuring political stability” and “continuous quality, stable and sustainable economic growth” (Sims 2024, 210). Liberalization of Laos’ economy during the 1990s under the New Economic Mechanism — or NEM — was aimed at transforming the economy from dependence on subsistence agriculture toward a market-oriented model which connected it with the region at large (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun 2023). Growth is pursued primarily through capital-intensive sectors such as hydropower, mining, agriculture, and the creation of special economic zones (SEZs), supported by foreign direct investment (FDI) — especially from China (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun 2023).

This approach places macroeconomic indicators at the center of policy, sometimes at the expense of social outcomes such as gender equity (B. Howe 2023; Sims 2021a). The model privileges large-scale infrastructure and extractive industry projects — particularly in



Banana plantation in Lao PDR. Photo credit: Phoonsab.

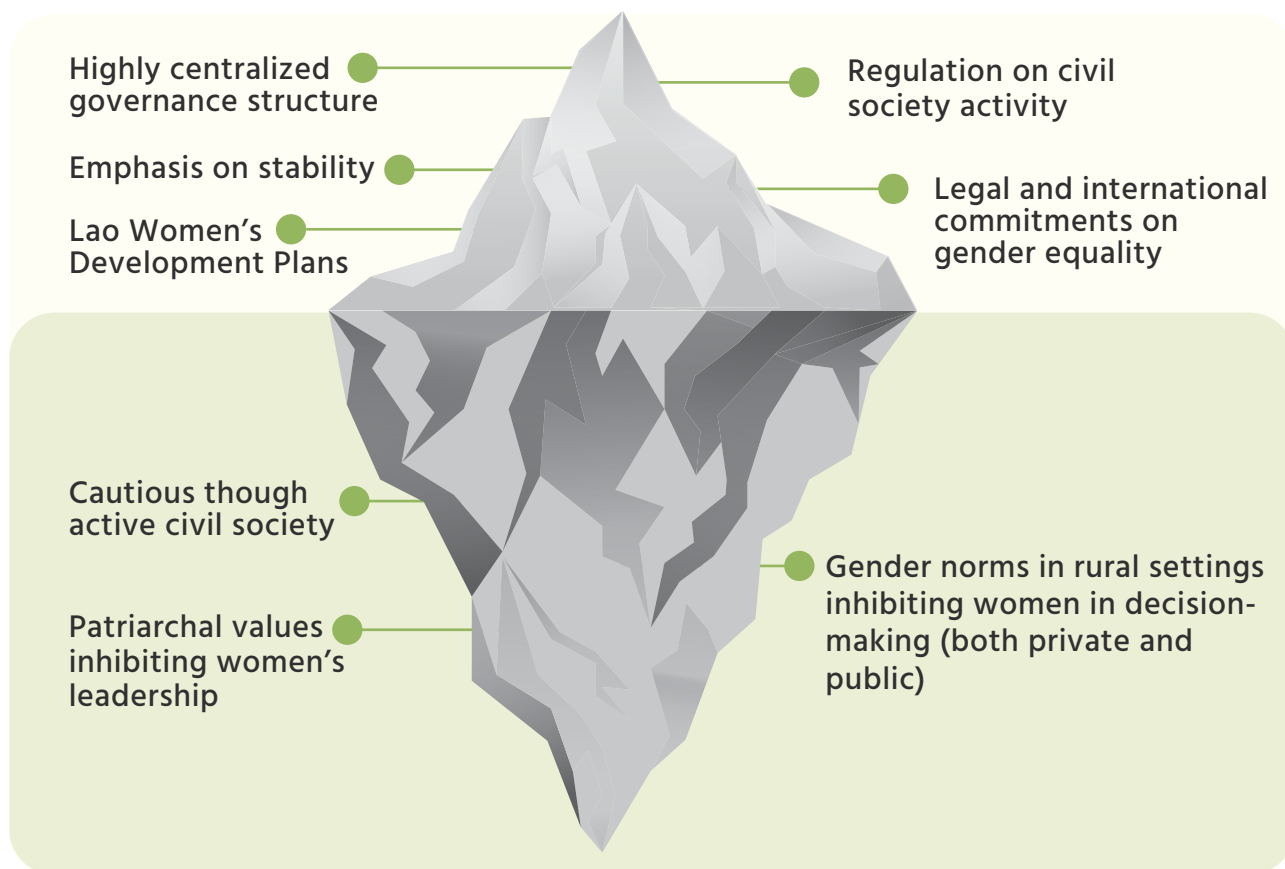
hydropower, mining, and logistics — driven in part by foreign direct investment from China (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun 2023). Nearly half of the country’s external debt is owed to China (Sims 2024). While such investments have increased Laos’ regional connectivity — rebranding it from “landlocked” to “land-linked” — they have also generated new insecurities for women, especially in border regions and SEZs.

The Golden Triangle SEZ, in particular, has become a site of heightened risk. Increased transnational links through infrastructure projects have made it easier for trafficking, extortion, and narcotics to spread in this region (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun 2023; Sims 2024). The CEDAW Committee (2024) explicitly highlighted the Golden Triangle as an area where women’s insecurity is exacerbated and where trafficking for sexual exploitation continues to rise. Despite the adoption of the National Plan of Action on Anti-Trafficking in Persons, Phase III (2021–2025), prosecutions remain low due to limited human, financial, and technical resources allocated to enforcement (CEDAW 2024).

The development pressures mentioned above intersect with entrenched poverty, weak labor protections, and high migration flows, particularly of young women into informal or poorly regulated labor markets. Participants widely recognized these intersections as drivers of gender-based violence and trafficking (Interviews with civil society, April 2025). CSOs largely view poverty as the major generator of human security issues affecting women and girls, including trafficking in persons (Interviews with civil society and arts-based organizations, April 2025). These challenges are most acute in rural areas and among ethnic minorities, where exposure to state services is low and customary norms remain strong.

The Government of Laos has taken some formal steps aligned with the WPS agenda. The National Plan of Action on the Prevention and Elimination of Violence Against Women and Children (2021–2025) provides a partial platform for addressing some WPS-related concerns. A forthcoming national plan is also expected to address climate change impacts on women. However, enforcement remains weak, particularly in remote or marginalized communities where both resources and institutional capacity are limited (CEDAW 2024).

Figure 3: An Iceberg of Lao PDR



Formal and Informal Rules and Norms Shaping WPS in Laos

The political environment in Lao PDR shapes how the WPS agenda is discussed, interpreted, and implemented. Laos has a centralized governance structure, with the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) guiding the functions of government, the judiciary, the military, and the media.

The LPRP has governed Laos since 1975. It is the only legal political party, and it plays a central role in determining governance and policymaking. The revised Constitutional Framework (2015) affirmed the socialist orientation of the state and concentrated power in central authorities. Yet a recent constitutional amendment, promulgated in March 2025, included changes that signified steps toward decentralizing governance. Local governments are now responsible for formulating and implementing their own development, budget, and security plans. These changes might alter the balance of power in Laos, although it is still too early to comment on how they might affect the WPS landscape in the country. It is likely the LPRP will continue to play a central role.



Livelihood along Mekong riverbank in Lao PDR. Photo credit: Phoonsab.

This context has led to a cautious and strategic approach by CSOs and other actors working on gender and peace-related issues (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun 2023). Amongst those interviewed from the arts sector and CSOs working on women's rights, many expressed a need to avoid sensitive issues (Interviews with CSOs and art-based community organizations, April 2025). *Decree No. 238 on the operation of nonprofit associations*, which governs the operation of nonprofit associations, delineates operational boundaries by restricting CSO activity to areas aligned with state-defined priorities such as economic development, poverty reduction, or social welfare. Adopted in 2017, the decree delineates the space in which civil society can operate (Sims 2021b). Those involved in WPS-related work tend, therefore, to couch their work in more technocratic or "soft" development language (Baird 2021).

A key pillar of the government's development plan is "stability." The 9th five-year National Socio-Economic Development Plan enshrines "political stability" and "continuous quality, stable and sustainable economic growth" as the top national objectives (Government of Laos, n.d.). While women's rights are sometimes perceived as non-threatening by the state and thus tolerated (Sims 2021b), the CEDAW Committee has nonetheless raised concerns about reprisals against CSOs (CEDAW 2024). Jo and Hwang (2023) note that awareness of gender equality has improved in recent years among the public and through the work of women's organizations.

Legal frameworks and international commitments related to gender equality and WPS — such as the National Action Plan on the Prevention and Elimination of Violence Against Women and Children (2021–2025) — do exist, but some observers see them as insufficient by themselves. “Laos accepts, adopts everything [international frameworks, conventions, etc.]; but where is the minimum implementation level?” (Interview with CSO, April 2025). That said, one person working in the arts sector pointed out, “[the] Government of Laos already [has] its National Action Plans (NAPs) ... that is not called WPS” (Interview, arts-based community organization, April 2025). This view was also shared by those within government who observed, “Although the state has many laws in place, implementation remains limited. The government has set important goals, but in practice, these are not always effectively achieved” (Interview with government representative, April 2025).

There are frameworks within the Lao Women’s Union (LWU) that align with WPS goals, including the Lao Women’s Development Plan for 2021–2025, particularly on counselling and protective services for women and children (Interviews with government, April 2025). The LWU aims to integrate and implement projects that focus on WPS areas — including combating human trafficking — into the draft for the Lao Women’s Development Plan 2026–2030 and the National Plan of Action on Combatting Human Trafficking for 2026–2030 (Interviews with government, April 2025). The LWU is also integrating WPS into the 10th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2026–2030), with support from The Asia Foundation’s AMPLIFY initiative, demonstrating political will to advance Laos’ regional commitment to WPS. Nevertheless, challenges remain in resourcing the implementation of these plans. Government representatives commented that there is a limited level of awareness and understanding of the agenda’s aims among departments and individuals in national government, as well as a shortage of personnel with the knowledge and capacity to effectively implement initiatives relating to WPS (Interviews with government, April 2025).

Patriarchal attitudes continue to dominate public and private life in Laos, especially in rural and ethnic minority communities. These deeply held beliefs limit women’s access to leadership positions and constrain their participation in decision-making processes (UNDP 2021). This was reflected by civil society groups that commented on gender norms in rural and ethnic communities and suggested that women are socialized not to speak up on security issues and rely on their husbands, not just financially but also for leadership on decision-making (Interviews with civil society, April 2025). Government actors also acknowledged the influence of entrenched beliefs: “Historically, women were viewed as weaker, lacking authority in decision-making, excluded from participation, and burdened with more responsibilities than men” (Interview with government representative, April 2025). Government representatives recognizing that gender norms inhibit women from attaining leadership positions is a positive step and could provide a foothold for future WPS programming.



Stakeholders and Power in Lao PDR

In Laos, political power is concentrated in the party-state apparatus, yet multiple actors — both domestic and international — hold stakes in how WPS operate.

The LWU, a mass organization closely tied to the state, serves as the primary institutional conduit for gender-related policy and programming. Its proximity to the government affords it unique access to decision-makers and influence over national policies (Sims 2021b; Faming 2018). It has privileged access to senior policymakers and plays a recognized role in developing and implementing gender-related initiatives. However, its capacity for independent advocacy is limited by its institutional alignment with the party-state. Both CSO and government representatives noted that the remit of the LWU is constrained by funding restrictions and limited institutional power over other ministries, with gender issues largely siloed to the LWU and not integrated within other ministries (Interviews with CSOs and government representatives, April 2025).



A woman's life in Lao PDR. Photo credit: Phoonsab.

The military and police remain largely disengaged from the WPS agenda, and few linkages exist between security sector actors and gender programming. Although Laos boasts the highest percentage of women in law enforcement among ASEAN countries at 20 percent, according to INTERPOL (2020), these positions are primarily operational and do not extend to policymaking or strategic decision-making within the security sector.

CSOs and those working within arts-focused community organizations represent a more open and committed front on WPS-aligned issues. Throughout interviews, it became clear that there is a focus on practical concerns that intersect with WPS, such as safe migration, trafficking prevention, disaster response, and women's economic empowerment among CSOs.

These actors often operate at the grassroots level and are deeply embedded in their communities, as opposed to operating within formal security sectors. As already mentioned, CSOs are cautious with their framing of security issues given the political climate, though they are expertly placed to manage the sensitivity of peace and security issues in their activities, while still undertaking practical advocacy work that contributes to WPS goals (Interviews with CSOs, April 2025).

International donors and INGOs also hold a stake in Lao development and governance but operate carefully within government-imposed limits on research, advocacy, and policy engagement (Sims 2021b). Many INGOs in Laos focus on public health, education, or infrastructure and do not openly criticize the government (Sims 2024). Donors and INGOs can introduce gender mainstreaming and elements of the WPS agenda if positioned as supportive of national development goals in ways that do not challenge the government's single-party structure. INGOs were specifically noted by CSOs as providing opportunities for further WPS programming (Interviews with CSOs, April 2025).

“CSOs are cautious with their framing of security issues given the political climate, though they are expertly placed to manage the sensitivity of peace and security issues in their activities.”

Recommendations

- **Be mindful of the contention around the word “security” in Lao PDR and use strategic framing: align WPS with national narratives.**

Avoid direct use of “security” language. Use locally accepted terms like “peace and stability” for programming to both generate further buy-in from government ministries beyond the LWU and protect CSOs who may start to conduct their work under the terminology of WPS.

- **Clearly articulate the relevance of WPS to existential needs.**

There is a lack of clarity about what WPS actually is across stakeholders in Lao PDR. Because the scope of WPS is not clearly defined, stakeholders often conflate it with other gender equality frameworks and fail to see its relevance beyond the existing structures in place for women and girls in Laos. It is important to highlight how WPS addresses the existential needs of women, including poverty and poverty-generated human security issues such as trafficking in persons. Develop communication and training materials that explain how WPS can directly support better livelihoods, safety during migration, protection from trafficking, and leadership in peace and security institutions during times of crisis.

- **Invest in bottom-up approaches and support local ecosystems.**

Many CSOs are already working directly on security issues that affect women and girls in Lao PDR. Continue to fund small, locally embedded CSOs already working on trafficking prevention, safe migration, disaster response, and GBV, even if they don’t use WPS language. Help local groups map how their current activities align with the WPS pillars without forcing them to adopt unfamiliar language. Support these groups in building networks with each other where work aligns with WPS goals.

- **Support knowledge and capacity-building for government personnel.**

While there are frameworks that can support the implementation of WPS initiatives in Lao PDR, such as the Lao Women’s Development Plans, there is a lack of capacity and specific knowledge on WPS objectives to sufficiently implement them. Investing in workshops and training for government representatives — selected using a political economy approach to identify receptive participants — across departments, may help to improve the effectiveness of WPS-aligned project implementation.

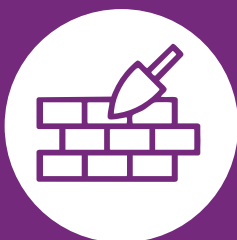
- **Pilot WPS at a subnational level.**

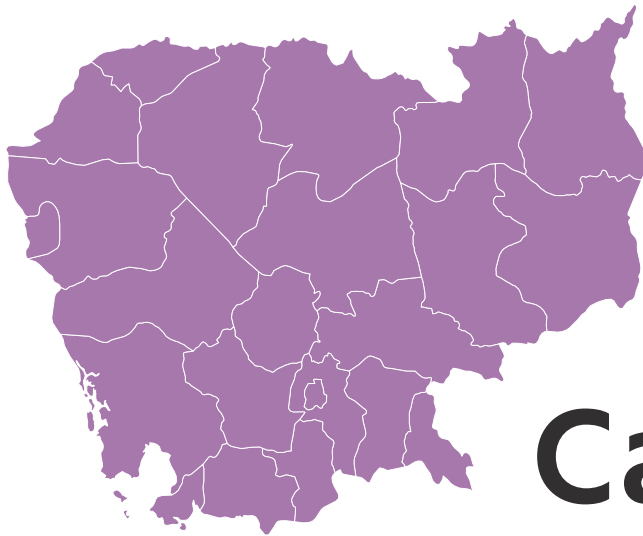
One way to ensure that the relevance and applicability of WPS to Laos is understood and appreciated by stakeholders across the board is to conduct a pilot of its implementation that focuses on regions where human security issues are disproportionately affecting women and girls. The Asia Foundation via the AMPLIFY initiative is currently taking this approach in Bokeo and Savannakhet provinces, where issues such as trafficking in persons disproportionately affect women and girls.



Cambodia

- How WPS is Understood and Practiced in Cambodia
- Foundational Features Shaping WPS in Cambodia
- Formal and Informal Rules and Norms Shaping WPS in Cambodia
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Cambodia

How WPS is Understood and Practiced in Cambodia

There seems to be a strong appetite for the WPS agenda in Cambodia among both government and civil society stakeholders. Cambodia is viewed as a “WPS Champion” at the ASEAN level (Interview with ASEAN representative, April 2025), and the agenda’s principles seem to resonate with stakeholders across the country at all levels — although awareness and implementation are still in very early stages and vary across actors and sectors.

“WPS has been our aspiration for years, especially to increase women’s participation in peace and security sectors.”

Some research participants in Cambodia had a strong grasp of its international roots and local relevance, while others were unclear about its definition or strategic purpose. One participant from civil society reflected, “To be frank, WPS has been our aspiration for years, especially to increase women’s participation in peace and security sectors.” But others shared that the “WPS agenda among my circles is not a new concept ... but when we start to discuss the WPS agenda, there was some confusion and emerging questions. Why do we need to have the WPS agenda, when our country is a peaceful country and has no war anymore?” (Interviews with civil society and international non-government organizations, April 2025). A representative working in transitional justice said, “I don’t understand clearly about the WPS agenda ... but I think having this agenda is very good because it will help to prevent war to happen again” (Interview, April 2025).



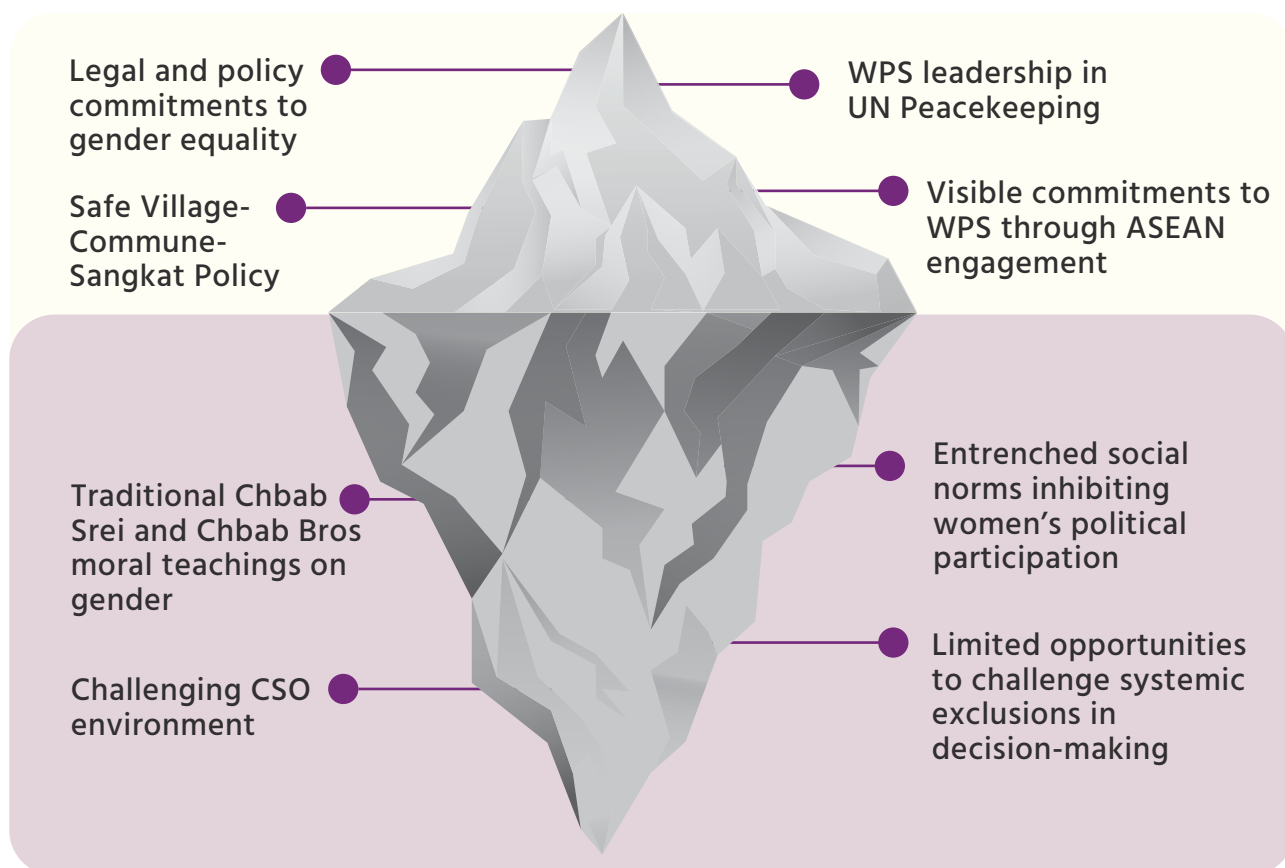
Market in Mondul Kiri, Cambodia. Photo credit: AMPLIFY, June 2025.

There are many different interpretations of the term “peace” among different actors, which impact the reception of WPS and its relevance in the Cambodian context. The point of contention is between the state definition of peace as the absence of war, and civil society’s definition of “positive peace” — a view that stresses that several additional conditions must be met to create a peaceful society, including sustainable development, economic security, and harmonious social relations (Interviews with civil society, April 2025; Ministry of Information 2022; Simangan 2018; Lee 2021). The state definition of “peace” is entangled with the government’s view of itself and its success in maintaining a society without war — it is at the heart of the national narrative — whereas “positive peace” suggests there is still significant work to be done.

This means that the framing of the WPS agenda is immediately political in Cambodia. Interview participants noted that there is much more space to discuss historical reconciliation, but that contemporary framings of peace as a process can be construed as sensitive. Capturing the importance of this nuance, one person we interviewed asked, “What kind of ‘peace’ do you want to talk about? The government’s version of peace?” (Interviews with civil society representatives, April 2025).

These perspectives show that while WPS is widely seen as relevant to the country’s development, its formal framework is not yet fully understood, and the meaning of peace remains contested. This has direct implications for how WPS is practiced. At the same time, the appetite for the broader goals of WPS seems strong among stakeholders of different backgrounds — government and non-government — and aligns with the work that many organizations are already undertaking.

Figure 4: An Iceberg of Cambodia



Foundational Features Shaping WPS in Cambodia

Cambodia's WPS landscape is deeply shaped by its history of conflict and genocide and ongoing dependence on international aid. Cambodia's modern political context cannot be separated from its history of protracted conflict, genocide, and foreign intervention. A devastating period began in 1970 during the civil war between the government and the insurgent communist party and intensified through the U.S. bombing campaign from 1968 to 1975, contributing to widespread social upheaval (Kochanski 2021). The Khmer Rouge regime, which took power in 1975, was responsible for mass atrocities, including genocide, forced marriages, the use of child soldiers, and systemic sexual and gender-based violence (Kochanski 2021; Tyner 2018).

Following the fall of the Khmer Rouge, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in the early 1990s introduced a constitution based on free market principles (Barter 2024). However, the legacies of mass violence and totalitarian rule continue to reverberate, influencing how conflicts are addressed, how gender-based violence is acknowledged — or not — in official narratives, and how women's involvement in peace and security is valued (Veneracion-Rallonza 2016; Kochanski 2021). A participant from civil society



Livelihood in Mondul Kiri, Cambodia. Photo credit: AMPLIFY, June 2025.

noted, “In the Cambodia context, women played a lot of important roles in rebuilding and maintaining peace in the country after the Khmer Rouge regime” (Interview with civil society, April 2025). Yet this role remains under-recognized. Another person interviewed discussed how “Women were taken out during the process of peace negotiation — [they were] not at the same table. But women put a lot of effort to stay at the back to support the process. This issue happened because of social norms and there [was] no mechanism to push and support women’s participation.” And another discussed how “WPS seems to be a new term, but it is not new, we have been doing this for a really long time since the Khmer Rouge ended. During the Khmer Rouge Trials, women lawyers were there, so the level of women’s participation [was high] during that time” (Interview with INGO and civil society, April 2025). These observations reflect a longer narrative of conflict, peace and women’s inclusion in security that is shaped by the historical context in Cambodia.



Formal and Informal Rules and Norms Shaping WPS in Cambodia

Cambodia's 1993 Constitution enshrined the principle of liberal democracy and market reform (Barter 2024), including a guarantee of gender equality. A range of gender policy frameworks exists, such as the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women (NAP-VAW) and the Neary Rattanak VI Strategic Plan (2024–2028), which integrates gender into sectors including defense and peacekeeping (Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies 2023; Veneracion-Rallonza 2016). These instruments are supported by Cambodia's engagement in UN peacekeeping missions and a growing number of high-profile women in the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF), including two women promoted to three- and four-star generals in 2023 (Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies 2023).

Nevertheless, entrenched social norms continue to hinder women's participation in public life, despite formal commitments. Traditional gender expectations are codified in cultural teachings such as the *Chbab Srei* and *Chbab Bros* — *cultural norms directly translated as "Female Law" and "Male Law" respectively* — which emphasize female obedience and male authority (Lilja and Baaz 2016; Sovann 2019). A civil society participant observed: "Currently, women play an important role at almost every level: at decision-making level, for social work, as civil servants, activists, informal sector, and peacekeepers, but the number is still limited" (Interview with civil society, April 2025). These cultural expectations also influence peacekeeping participation. Despite government efforts to promote women peacekeepers, persistent gender norms continue to shape decisions about deployment. Research has shown that stigma can arise when women leave home to serve, due to expectations around caregiving and familial duties (Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies 2023).

Institutionally, Cambodia has formal legal frameworks that protect women's rights —including a constitutional guarantee of equality and national policies like the Neary Rattanak VI Strategic Plan, the (NAP-VAW) and the Safe Village-Commune-Sangkat Policy which partly focuses on combatting issues like sexual violence at village and commune level — however some reports suggest enforcement tends to be weak and accountability remains limited (Palmer and Williams 2017; Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies 2023). Participants consistently raised concerns that women's participation in decision-making is low, and formal institutions offer few avenues for challenging exclusion. As one CSO representative suggested, "Currently, women play an important role in almost every sector, but only a few of them are included at the decision-making level" (Interview with civil society, April 2025).

In January 2025, a draft Law against Non-Recognition of Crimes Committed during the Democratic Kampuchea Period was approved in a plenary cabinet session (Khmer Times 2025). The law is designed to punish those who either deny or glorify the crimes committed during the Khmer Rouge era — although some critics suggest the law might silence dissent rather than lead to genuine accountability (Agence France-Presse 2025). The enactment of this law will need to be carefully navigated by those working on peace issues and should be considered in WPS programming.



Indigenous People's Market in Mondulkiri, Cambodia. Photo credit: AMPLIFY, June 2025.



Stakeholders and Power in Cambodia

In Cambodia's centralized system, WPS policy decisions are made at the executive level, with implementation led by national ministries (Howe, Peou, and Uesugi 2021; Kochanski 2021). The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) serves as the main interface between the government and development partners on gender equality, but its influence over security and foreign policy is limited. Interview participants mentioned the challenges for MoWA as a formal stakeholder in WPS but with few levers for formal influence or coordination with other ministries. As one civil society participant noted: "Among the line ministries, the Ministry of Women's Affairs is the main actor in leading the WPS agenda. But the collaboration is still not strong, and most of the ministries lack the knowledge on WPS" (Interview with civil society, April 2025). Other ministries, particularly in the security and defense sectors, are seen as distant or inaccessible to civil society and not actively engaged in the WPS agenda unless through UN-led peacekeeping initiatives (Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies 2023). CSOs also comment that the success of WPS relies on a good understanding of the benefits of the agenda to Cambodia's socioeconomic development (Interviews with civil society, April 2025).

Cambodia is a constitutional monarchy with a multi-party system. In practice, one party has held power for an extended period, resulting in centralized governance structures (Williams 2021; Kochanski 2021). The influence of “local gatekeepers” — such as commune chiefs — extends into how civil society can function and who gets access to state resources. These informal power dynamics limit the potential for gender-focused CSOs to influence WPS policy meaningfully at a policy level, especially on politically sensitive issues.

CSOs play a critical role in promoting women’s rights, transitional justice, and community peacebuilding. However, CSO participation in the process of developing the WPS agenda is still limited. One CSO representative particularly lamented this point, expressing that “The government should provide a space for CSOs to provide input or insight based on their work and expertise. CSOs also should be ready to provide support to the Government and consider from which angle we can support” (Interview with INGO, April 2025). Nevertheless, CSOs interviewed also acknowledged the government’s efforts to progress the WPS agenda, although they voiced some concern about the limited space for CSO consultation. “On WPS, Cambodia is a leader regionally as well. During Cambodia’s chairmanship of ASEAN, we adopted the Regional Plan of Action ... but as for WPS engagement on national and community levels, the meaningful engagement is still very limited ” (Interview with CSOs, April 2025).

“On WPS, Cambodia is a leader regionally as well. During Cambodia’s chairmanship of ASEAN, we adopted the Regional Plan of Action ... but as for WPS engagement on national and community levels, the meaningful engagement is still very limited.”

International donors and UN agencies have contributed to much of Cambodia’s WPS-related discourse. UN Women and UNDP are frequently cited as key drivers of WPS programming (Interview with INGO, April 2025). However, many of these initiatives are short-term and donor-led, limiting local ownership (Barter 2024; Kochanski 2021; Interview with CSOs, April 2025). Despite these constraints, several participants identified opportunities to strengthen WPS engagement. CSOs continue to collaborate with donors, and there is optimism about international engagement, peacekeeping participation, and youth-led collective action. As one participant noted, “I think now is an opportunity for Cambodia, because we want to be a leader on the regional level. ... The government had become quite known in the region for leading WPS ... so it is like positive pressure for them to do it” (Interview with civil society, April 2025).

Recommendations

- **Be mindful of how “Peace” is understood in Cambodia.**

The government is sensitive about which “peace” is used to describe peacebuilding, particularly whether it relates to the absence of war, or it is about a participatory and ongoing process to prevent insecurity. There is, however, scope to challenge the language and framing of WPS by the government and ensure it still captures the views of CSOs working on these issues, but framing should be approached strategically. Rely on CSOs who navigate this space to inform further approaches.

- **Fund local research and documentation.**

It became clear through interviews that WPS is viewed as highly relevant to the Cambodian context because of the country’s longer history with the Khmer Rouge and conflict. Engage with stakeholders who work in post-conflict recovery and transitional justice, as this will help support the legitimacy of WPS and align with locally defined WPS practices.

- **Support inter-ministry coordination on WPS.**

Interview participants cited a lack of government coordination on WPS and an impression that the agenda is only relevant for the Ministry for Women’s Affairs. Ministries — particularly those working on security and defense — should be given opportunities to learn about the WPS agenda and its relevance to their work. Leverage the international praise Cambodia has received on WPS to bolster this work among ministries. Coordinating between ministries and identifying areas for cooperation, including aligning WPS approaches with work already being conducted in security and defense-oriented ministries, will help to sell the agenda’s relevance to those who are disengaged.

- **Create platforms for CSOs and government actors to collaborate on designing WPS approaches, including National Action Plans.**

Civil society is eager to influence the shape of WPS programming and should be included in the design process of any policy seeking to implement the agenda, given its experiences already implementing programs that directly target women’s insecurity and peace programming. Programming should be mindful of the ongoing sensitivities in relation to peace activism in Cambodia presently.

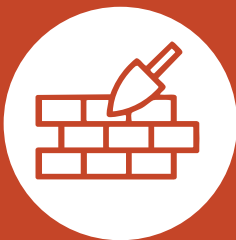
- **Shift from service-delivery logic to systems-change support.**

The appetite for a whole-of-system approach to WPS in Cambodia is strong, as there is buy-in from both government stakeholders and civil society actors. Ensure that donor funding strengthens the existing local ecosystems working on WPS issues by hosting workshops that bring groups together to facilitate knowledge sharing and solidarity, rather than fragmenting the space with scattered small-scale projects.



Philippines

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Philippines



How WPS is Understood and Practiced in the Philippines

The WPS agenda has a long history in the Philippines. The Philippines was the first country in Asia to adopt a national action plan on WPS in 2010 and has since released four generations of national action plans (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, WILPF 2025; Trojanowska 2021). While the application of the agenda is not without its flaws, the Philippines offers compelling insights into the institutionalization of the WPS agenda, including both its leadership in pushing forward UNSCR1325 and areas where the agenda has not translated into substantive change for women. Key informants emphasized the Philippines' role as a regional leader in ASEAN for WPS initiatives and an example of "best practice" given its long institutional engagement and civil society work on the agenda, including localization of WPS that spans both national and subnational frameworks — such as the Bangsamoro Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (BRAP-WPS) 2023–2028 alongside several generations of National Action Plans on WPS by national governments (Interviews with civil society, 2025; Trojanowska 2021; WILPF n.d.). National action plans have positioned the Philippines as a strong international leader on WPS and hold the government to account for its implementation of the agenda.

“National action plans have positioned the Philippines as a strong international leader on WPS and hold the government to account for its implementation of the agenda.”



Exhibited artworks at the Transforming WPS Learning into Action Workshop. Photo credit: AMPLIFY, December 2024.

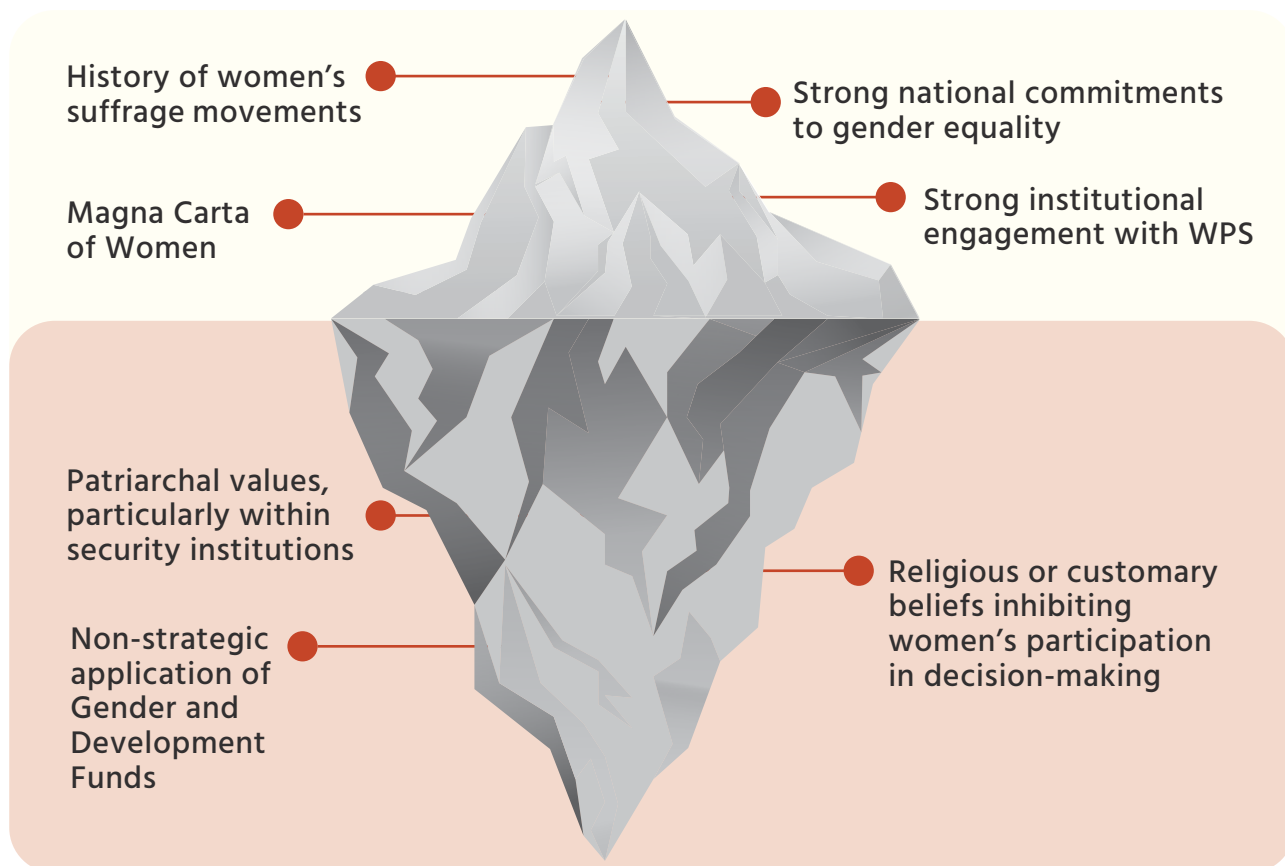
The understanding of WPS in the Philippines cannot be discussed without acknowledging the significance of WPS in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). As already mentioned, at the subnational level, the BARMM has its own Regional Action Plan on WPS, which is already in its third iteration. One of the most significant armed conflicts in the Philippines has been the protracted conflict in Mindanao, home to the Moro people and various indigenous groups. In recent decades, efforts to end the Moro conflict have led to peace agreements and the establishment of the BARMM, including the historic signing of the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, signed by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front's chief negotiator and the Philippine government's Professor Miriam Coronel-Ferrer (the first woman chief negotiator authorized to sign a major peace accord) (Trojanowska 2021). The BARMM is the region where WPS is thought to be "most alive" with one participant commenting that in the BARMM and particularly the Bangsamoro peace process, WPS is most visible relative to the rest of the country, given both the policy frameworks that exist to support WPS in the region and women's civil society activism on peace and security.

Aside from the significance of WPS in the context of armed conflict and the Bangsamoro peace process, WPS is also understood in a broader sense in the Philippines. For example, one participant commented that the WPS agenda has evolved from a narrow perspective on security, focused on arms control and ceasefires, to expanding into human security and community well-being (Interview with civil society, April 2025). National action plans have focused on cross-cutting issues including the substantive representation, participation, and leadership of women at all levels in peace-related spaces and postconflict reconstruction — as well as the prevention pillar of WPS — which focuses on the prevention of conflict and violence against women and girls during conflict — that is often overlooked in other contexts (Shepherd 2020).

At the same time, participants still noted the limitations in the application and use of WPS — a former government representative noted that WPS is used where it's convenient in the Philippines, mentioning that the government "... used WPS where it was convenient — for BARMM, for the formal peace process. But no one thought to apply WPS to things like the drug war. It was selective" (Interview with former government representative, April 2025). This response highlights a limited or constrained application of WPS in the Philippines context, with cases such as ex-President Duterte's war on drugs, including extrajudicial killings and its disproportionate impact on women and children, and the ongoing New People's Army rebellion conflict in the north of the country not being considered through a WPS lens (Presto and Curato 2024).

WPS is implemented across government agencies through budget allocations known as gender and development (GAD) frameworks, ensuring that government agencies and local governments integrate WPS objectives into their annual programming (UN Women 2016). GAD mechanisms — typically 5 per cent of an agency's overall budget — are viewed as crucial parts of the WPS architecture in the Philippines that help to keep the agenda alive and continuing. A former government official spoke to the virtues of this mechanism by emphasizing how GAD provided a mandate for gender budgeting and programming at the local level, and WPS sits within this preexisting architecture (Interview with former government official, April 2025). At the same time, streamlining WPS in this way has had the unfortunate effect of siloing WPS issues as gender issues as opposed to a cross-cutting agenda that is as much a security issue as it is a gender-equality issue. Other participants, mainly from CSOs, reflected on the limitations of the GAD model. They suggested that GAD frameworks fail to give sufficient space for WPS to be emphasized in their agencies, non-strategic use of the funds for arbitrary activities, and a misunderstanding by local government units on how to integrate peace and security issues into their GAD plans (Interviews with CSOs, April 2025). The GAD model provides a valuable base for WPS funding, but research participants suggested its application needs to be more strategic, and clearer links between gender budgeting and peace and security outcomes need to be articulated to those who utilize the funds.

Figure 5: An Iceberg of Philippines



Foundational Features Shaping WPS in the Philippines

The implementation of WPS in the Philippines is shaped by historical legacies of conflict and a strong tradition of women's rights advocacy and role in the revolutionary history of the Philippines. Post-independence, the Philippines saw the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos (1972–1986), followed by the People Power movement that contributed to the end of the authoritarian regime and restored democracy. Despite a democratic constitution being formally established in 1986, the postcolonial reality in the Philippines is that patronage politics have become entrenched over time (Uesugi et al. 2021). One participant commented that in the context of the BARMM, women are consistently on the ground in conflict-affected areas and do not wait for authorities to tell them to act. Instead, they start initiatives, mediate between families in the conflict, and help communities during crises (Interview with civil society, April 2025). The context of armed conflict in the Philippines' history has helped to generate momentum for WPS and shape the larger narrative about its relevance and use in the Filipino context.



Participants at the Transforming WPS Learning into Action Workshop. Photo credit: AMPLIFY, December 2024.

A decentralized approach to governance on WPS has also influenced its shape in the Philippines. The Philippines is an archipelago of over 7,000 islands, which complicates the central government's ability to implement policy uniformly. Mindanao, in particular, is geographically separate from Luzon — containing the seat of political power in Manila — fostering distinct regional identities and governance structures. As mentioned, the BARMM area is culturally, linguistically, and religiously distinct from the predominantly Catholic north. These geographic realities serve as a “boundary” condition in political economy terms, limiting the scope for uniform policy interventions (UN Women 2016). One participant explains this divide by suggesting that Mindanao is still thought of as “distant,” both in terms of geography and politically (Interview with civil society, April 2025). **This means that the implementation of WPS locally is shaped by local governance structures much more than the national-level frameworks.** One participant told us that a lot of WPS's success depends on whether you have strong local champions on the ground or not (Interview with former OPAPRU representative, April 2025).



Formal and Informal Rules and Norms Shaping WPS in the Philippines

The Philippines has a long institutional culture of engaging in gender equality policy frameworks at the national and international levels. These frameworks have been directly influenced by a history of women's suffrage movements in the country and national level commitments to gender equality (Interviews with civil society and academia, April 2025). The Philippines was also the first ASEAN member state to sign and ratify CEDAW in 1980 and 1981 and it played a central role in the development of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995: the chair of the UN Commission on the Status of Women was Leticia Ramos Shahani from the Philippines and the chair of the Main Committee on negotiations and consensus at the Fourth World Conference on Women — where the Beijing Platform for Action was adopted — was Patricia Licuanan, also from the Philippines (Philippine Commission on Women 2017; Philippine Commission on Women 2020; UN Division for the Advancement of Women 1996). Several participants noted that WPS has always aligned closely with the Philippine government's international and national commitments toward gender equality, including to the UNSCR 1325 and subsequent mandates from the UN Security Council, and the Magna Carta of Women — a comprehensive national law that promotes and protects the rights of women in the Philippines underneath which WPS sits today (Interview with former OPAPRU representative, April 2025). These legal foundations have helped to integrate WPS principles domestically, offering both symbolic and practical leverage for civil society groups and WPS advocates within government.

Despite the strength of WPS on paper and institutionally in the Philippines, informal rules can impact the implementation of WPS in the country. One participant candidly suggested that despite the laws being strong, including the Magna Carta of Women, societal attitudes, especially at the local level, are still very traditional, and “The law can be progressive, but society's mindset hasn't always caught up” (Interview with civil society, April 2025). Patriarchal attitudes can be noted both within security institutions in the country and in the unfulfilling application of GAD frameworks, as well as discriminatory perspectives toward ethnic minority groups, highlighting the intersections between marginalizations in the Philippines.

A good example is the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police, where “masculinist identity” remains largely unchallenged (Trojanowska 2018). Policies like a 20 percent recruitment quota for women at the Philippine Military Academy (PMA) signify incremental progress (Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies 2023). Nevertheless, gender disparities persist, with female participation in the armed forces and police force still relatively low, partly due to broader social expectations around marriage and childcare (Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies 2023). As one participant who was involved in the initial policy formulation of WPS in the Philippines reflected, despite the strong legislation in the Philippines and Magna Carta of Women, they still had to sit down with generals and



Young woman representative at the *Transforming WPS Learning into Action* Workshop.
Photo credit: AMPLIFY, December 2024.

convince them about WPS — and many didn't seem to want women involved in decision-making at such a high level (Interview with civil society, April 2025). This reflects some of the uphill battles that women's civil society has undergone to formalize WPS as a framework.

In the BARMM, cultural and religious norms compound these complexities. While certain communities have historic traditions of women's leadership, conservative interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence sometimes challenge aspects of the WPS agenda (Huesca Jr 2021). This interplay of formal and informal systems creates a hybrid environment where local elites, religious leaders, and customary laws can either align with or obstruct formal WPS policies (Uesugi et al. 2021). One civil society representative commented that women leaders in the BARMM are very strong and capable, but nonetheless, in many places, they have to work much harder for the results of their efforts to be recognized in the community and by religious leaders (Interview with civil society, April 2025). This is compounded by intersectional layers of discrimination that privilege elite voices and constrain those experiencing multiple marginalizations in accessing decision-making spaces. These challenges reflect a reality that WPS across the Philippines has faced uphill battles among different communities, although ultimately it has still been successfully adopted at varying levels.



Stakeholders and Power in the Philippines

At the national level, the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation, and Unity (OPAPRU) — formerly OPAPP — serves as the chair of the National Steering Committee on Women, Peace and Security (NSC-WPS) and leads the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of the NAP-WPS (UN Women 2024). A technical working group has helped implement the national action plan, ensuring key government agencies, including defense and social welfare, coordinate their initiatives (Trojanowska 2021). OPAPRU's objectives include embedding peace in the social fabric, enhancing resilience, and addressing social, economic, and political issues underlying conflict. The Philippine Commission on Women is another central actor, ensuring gender considerations are integrated into national policy.

However, these formal, structured relationships are not necessarily the key formulations for ensuring WPS is implemented and codified in policy in the Philippines. As one participant suggested, you can have all the formal structures in place, but it is the informal networks and relationships between people that really get things done (Interview with civil society, April 2025). Civil society groups in the Philippines are strongly credited with the initial introduction of WPS into the Philippines context. Many women's groups played a pivotal role in drafting the first and subsequent NAP-WPS documents, often providing technical expertise and grassroots perspectives (Trojanowska 2021). They also act as knowledge holders and bridge international norms relating to WPS with local realities (Huesca Jr 2021). As one participant commented, the groundwork for the Philippines' very first national action plan on WPS began years before 2010 due to the efforts of civil society and women's leaders (Interview with former OPAPRU representative, April 2025).

“Civil society groups in the Philippines are strongly credited with the initial introduction of WPS into the Philippines context.”

In the Philippines, civil society is vibrant and deeply enshrined in law and practice. The 1987 Constitution explicitly encourages the participation of nongovernmental and community-based organizations (Uesugi et al. 2021). There is a strong relationship between government and civil society that allows women's groups to advocate for peace and security issues affecting them and influence policymakers at the governmental level. A former OPAPRU official commented on this dynamic, mentioning that civil society was heavily involved in the drafting of national action plans, and that grassroots voices were listened to by the government because civil society provided the legitimacy and connection to the ground that was needed to make WPS "work" (Interview with former OPAPRU representative, April 2025). Similarly, women's groups often use national action plans to monitor implementation of WPS and demand accountability where governments fall short (Trojanowska 2021). In the context of Mindanao, it has been women-led networks in Mindanao that have been instrumental in peace monitoring, conflict mediation, and gender-based planning of the regional plans of action for WPS (Uesugi et al. 2021; Interview with civil society, April 2025).

Another important institutionalization of WPS into policy frameworks at a national level is credited to the work of "WPS champions" who were instrumental in mainstreaming the concepts of WPS into policy spaces (Interview with civil society, April 2025). The Philippines' relatively high-level representation of women in governance and peace processes distinguishes the Philippines from other Southeast Asian contexts and is an institutional strength for frameworks such as WPS. Figures like Miriam Coronel Ferrer, who served as the chief negotiator for the Government of the Philippines-Moro Islamic Liberation Front Peace Process, and became the first female chief negotiator in the world to sign a final peace accord with a nonstate armed group, and Teresita Quintos Deles a feminist peace advocate and government official who is well-respected in the Philippines for having been the first woman presidential adviser on the peace process in the government, form part of this strong representation of women in peace processes in the country. Other key figures in the negotiating panel between the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front include current Member of the Bangsamoro Parliament, Raissa Jarjurie, who was the first woman to join the Moro Islamic Liberation Front's delegation and Yasmin Busran-Lao, a co-founder of several women's rights and development organizations in Mindanao (Bangsamoro Parliament n.d.; Conciliation Resources n.d.). At the same time, the presence of women in governance does not necessarily signal political will for WPS implementation. One participant noted the risk of elite capture, suggesting that sometimes the peace programs look good on paper, but when political dynasties take them over, they end up serving the elite interests instead of the needs of women or communities (Interview with civil society, April 2025). This suggests that technocrats who are champions for WPS can nevertheless harm rather than help the continued implementation and effectiveness of WPS in the Philippines.

Recommendations

- **Continue to prioritize civil society involvement in WPS and invest in and protect civic space to enable this to continue.**

The story of WPS in the Philippines is one of successful civil society activism. The initial momentum for WPS was generated by women's organizations, particularly women's rights organizations and community-based organizations in the country. Yet, momentum is slowing down, and government programming has less space for civil society input than previously. Consultation between the government and civil society should be streamlined into future WPS programming. Support should be provided to CSOs to improve their technical skills to implement and localize the agenda further.

- **Move beyond siloed gender budgeting under GAD.**

Gender budgeting is often credited for its ability to support WPS initiatives — however, our interviews identified non-strategic use of GAD funds. Independent monitoring mechanisms to track WPS commitments and spending under GAD, particularly in areas where non-strategic use or underutilization is common, are a possible solution. Monitoring of non-GAD spending for gender impact is another strategy to identify sustainable budgeting allocations for WPS.

- **Promote national-level ambitions for WPS beyond the BARMM.**

While the focus on WPS in the BARMM has been strong, the agenda's application at the national level remains selective. Greater ambition is needed in the Philippines to ensure that WPS is applied to other peace and security challenges that affect women and girls, including the war on drugs and other conflict areas. Identifying other armed conflicts and insecurities affecting women and girls in national action plans, as well as subnational regional action plans, will help strengthen the Philippines' position as a global leader on WPS.

- **Use the Philippines as an evidence base for other countries in the region.**

The development of WPS in the Philippines is important to understand for other countries. The case of Mindanao was vitally important for WPS to be implemented in the Philippines. Knowledge exchange between civil society groups from the Philippines and other countries in the region will also help to create a regional ecosystem of knowledge and capacity building for WPS implementation at a local level. This also includes the documentation and dissemination of lessons learned from the Philippines regarding civil society's involvement, localization, and integration of WPS in conflict-affected areas.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Across the region, as this report suggests, the meaning and uptake of WPS vary widely. At the regional level, ASEAN has embraced WPS as a formal agenda item but often avoids hard security issues, and there are limited opportunities for civil society participation. In the Philippines, the agenda has been institutionalized through successive national action plans and a strong legacy of civil society activism, particularly in Mindanao. In Cambodia, government support exists, but centralized governance systems combined with the contested meanings of “peace” complicate the transformative adoption of WPS. In Laos, WPS remains largely unfamiliar, constrained by a political system that prioritizes a particular notion of stability.

It is important not to lose sight of the broader aims of the WPS agenda: transforming peace and security practices at all levels so they adequately account for the needs of women and girls in the region. A common thread across all settings is that formal frameworks alone are insufficient. WPS uptake and impact depend on how well initiatives navigate underlying power dynamics, both visible and hidden. This report has provided the outlines of these dynamics, including the contextual features, longer histories and narratives of conflict, patriarchal values, and power relationships between stakeholders that influence the political feasibility of programming WPS-related projects in the region.

In ASEAN, WPS gains traction among regional stakeholders when linked to nontraditional security concerns, rather than armed conflict. In Laos, women’s groups are already addressing human security issues like trafficking in persons beyond a WPS frame, which should nonetheless be recognized as working toward the same goals. In Cambodia, the appetite for WPS is strong, but there remain some issues with framing and sensitivity around the word “peace” that need to be overcome. In the Philippines, WPS remains a strong agenda, but its momentum is at risk of slowing down without continued and strategic implementation. These variations underscore the importance of grounding WPS approaches in the political, cultural, and historical realities of each context.

This analysis suggests that to be effective, **future engagement with WPS in Southeast Asia must take a more adaptive, locally grounded, ecosystem-oriented approach and build from what already exists, rather than imposing new structures from outside. This includes a willingness to work beyond WPS terminology, meeting contexts where they are and focusing on advancing the spirit of the agenda rather than focusing narrowly on its normative language.** It also requires donors and implementing partners to acknowledge that initiatives primarily driven by them often do not yield sustainable results (Buchanan and Mra 2024) and encourages them to think politically: to understand not just what *should happen*, but what *can happen practically* given existing relationships of power, legitimacy, and institutional capacity.

Recommendations:

- **Look beyond the policy and legal frameworks and embrace the “invisible” drivers of power and change.**

While regional plans, national action plans, and legal commitments provide symbolic value and signal commitment to WPS, the real levers of change often lie in informal relationships, bureaucratic incentives, political narratives, and cultural and social norms. Actors should analyze and engage these invisible drivers to unlock pathways for WPS that are politically feasible and locally meaningful.

- **Support and fund women’s groups already advancing WPS-aligned objectives, even when they don’t use WPS language.**

Across all countries studied, there is a rich landscape of women’s organizations working on issues that fall under the WPS umbrella, even though they may not invoke WPS language explicitly, due both to a lack of awareness about the scope of WPS but also the potential sensitivities that WPS naturally generates given its focuses on peace and security and because it confronts entrenched power inequalities including gender inequalities within security sectors. Funding and programming should focus on these groups, providing flexible support that values impact over terminology. Avoiding prescriptive language, while prioritizing WPS-consistent outcomes, can reduce political risk and increase buy-in.

- **Accept and work within national political narratives, while advancing transformative practices at the local level.**

Tied to the above, national discourses around peace and security often differ from international definitions. For example, “peace” in Cambodia is often equated with the absence of conflict, which is a state-led definition, while “security” in Laos is a politically sensitive term. Rather than challenging these head-on, WPS actors can align with national narratives to gain legitimacy while advancing participatory and inclusive practices in local communities. This pragmatic approach allows for reform through adaptation rather than confrontation.

- **Use ASEAN frameworks to build momentum, but place primary emphasis on enabling work that is already underway at local and grassroots levels.**

ASEAN’s Regional Plan of Action on WPS can provide legitimacy and open political space at the national level. However, real implementation happens on the ground. Regional platforms should therefore be used strategically to amplify local voices, promote peer learning, and generate political cover and motivation while investing most heavily in grassroots and subnational actors. This includes creating formal avenues for civil society engagement, strengthening regional knowledge-sharing mechanisms and networks, and supporting sustainability beyond donor funding cycles.

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Annex: Methodology

Data collection consisted of a review of relevant academic and grey literature, supplemented by key-informant interviews with stakeholders across the four sites. Interviews were conducted between March and April 2025 by in-country teams and the lead researcher. We conducted 13 interviews in Lao PDR, 8 interviews in Cambodia, 5 interviews in the Philippines, and 3 with ASEAN stakeholders. Participants included representatives from national governments, civil society organizations (CSOs), international non-government organizations, UN agencies, ASEAN-affiliated institutions, and the ASEAN Secretariat. Where relevant, quotes from interview participants are included throughout the report to illustrate key themes.

In each country, efforts were made to capture perspectives across different sectors and governance levels. In Lao PDR, interviews were conducted with actors from the Lao Women's Union, provincial CSOs, and private sector stakeholders working in the arts and community sector. In Cambodia, participants ranged from government officials and women's rights organizations to transitional justice actors. The Philippines case drew on interviews with former officials from the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity, academia, women's civil society leaders in Mindanao, and those involved in drafting successive National Action Plans on WPS. ASEAN-level interviews included ASEAN secretariat and agency representatives, donor partners, and UN staff involved in gender and peacebuilding initiatives.

Following the key-informant interviews, the in-country teams and the lead researcher gathered to conduct a validation workshop that tested the key themes emerging in each country selected for analysis when it comes to the political economy of WPS. A stakeholder mapping was also done to identify the key players in each location and the dynamics of power between actors that influence pathways to change for WPS programming and implementation in the region.

For more information:
www.asiafoundation.org/amplify  amplifyinfo@asiafoundation.org

