



Reimagining the Indo-Pacific: Using an Inclusive Lens

Policy Brief 3: Gender Mainstreaming in ASEAN's
Indo-Pacific Strategies

The Federal Foreign Office of Germany and Kubernein Initiative have taken the joint initiative to consolidate past and current perspectives and understand the extent of gender mainstreaming in the Indo-Pacific region, with a focus on climate, trade and economic security, human and non-traditional security. We consider the centrality of human security in the Indo-Pacific and aim to explore ways forward for shaping more inclusive policies within the region, as well as learn from best practices that may be particularly relevant to Indo-German engagement. The policy brief is part of a series of publications under Kubernein Initiative and the Federal Foreign Office's joint project. Our perspective is rooted in Germany's 'Feminist Foreign Policy' vision, and Kubernein Initiative's work on inclusive foreign policy from an Indian context.

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Gender Mainstreaming in ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Strategies: Potential Collaboration with India and Germany

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Introduction

Southeast Asia's geographical location has not only put the region in a strategic power contestation but also made ASEAN a key player in the Indo-Pacific region. It can be seen in the ways in which various documents on Indo-Pacific strategies by the United States, Germany and India engage ASEAN and endorse ASEAN centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation and inclusiveness in the Indo-Pacific region.

Gender mainstreaming is an important part of the ASEAN approach, and this brief argues that ASEAN can play a stronger role in bringing to the Indo-Pacific discourse the importance of gender inclusion and the role of women in various aspects of society, including their engagement in building community resilience, and fostering peace and security in the region. Therefore, this brief examines ASEAN's gender mainstreaming strategies and how they can be extended to the Indo-Pacific discourse to make more inclusive and impactful strategies. In such an effort, we also look at strategies for ASEAN to strengthen its cooperation with partners, such as India and Germany, with common concerns to create a more inclusive action within Southeast Asia.

ASEAN's Approaches in Gender Mainstreaming

ASEAN has actively worked towards incorporating gender into its various initiatives and frameworks. This regional organisation has institutionalised gender issues through some meetings and declarations.¹ In 1975, ASEAN convened the ASEAN Women Leaders Conference to formalise regional cooperation on women's issues. The ASEAN Sub-Committee on Women (ASW) was established the following year, which was renamed the ASEAN Women's Program (AWP) in 1981. Establishment of the ASEAN Committee on Women (ACW) in 2001 enabled restructuring and formal coordination of ASEAN's collaboration on women's concerns.

- **1975: ASEAN Women Leaders Conference.**
- **1981: Establishment of the ASEAN Women's Program.**
- **2004: Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in the ASEAN region.**
- **2021-2025: ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework.**

In 1988, ASEAN adopted the Declaration of the Advancement of Women in the ASEAN Region.² The Declaration aims to advance the role and contribution of women in the progress of the region. To monitor and coordinate the implementation of ASEAN's commitment to women's issues, the organisation established the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Women (AMMW) in 2002.

In 2004, ASEAN also released two important documents on pressing gender-related issues in Southeast Asia – the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in the ASEAN Region, and the ASEAN Declaration against Trafficking in Persons, particularly Women and Children. Following up on the Declaration and promise to the ASEAN Community in ensuring the fulfillment of human rights in the region, the ASEAN Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women in Children was established in 2010.³

ASEAN also has guidelines on gender mainstreaming in various sectoral initiatives such as disaster management; science and technology; labor and employment; food, agriculture, forestry; and renewable energy.⁴ Importantly, during the ASEAN Summit in November 2022, the organisation launched the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework (2021-2025). This framework serves to implement and support effective transformative efforts to promote gender equality through a whole-of-ASEAN approach.⁵

Missed Opportunity in ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Framework

The ASEAN approach to the Indo-Pacific is defined by the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) framework. The AOIP has identified areas of cooperation: maritime cooperation, connectivity, UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030, economic and other possible areas. However, the AOIP framework does not explicitly account for gender concerns and women's experiences in these areas, although in fact, promoting gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment has been integral to the 17 SDGs.

ASEAN's existing gender mainstreaming work accounts for efforts to ensure the participation of women in development agendas that are important for ASEAN countries. These agendas include managing disasters for community resilience and promoting peace and security for regional stability. These agendas need to be integrated into the Indo-Pacific framework, and can be furthered by collaborating with dialogue partners and countries in the Indo-Pacific region, such as India and Germany.

Avenues for ASEAN-India-Germany Collaboration Towards a More Inclusive Indo-Pacific

There is scope here for India and Germany to engage with ASEAN to ensure more gender inclusivity in the Indo-Pacific. Both countries are important partners for ASEAN and have historic engagement with the body. India became an ASEAN Dialogue Partner in 1996. Since then, cooperation has steadily grown, resulting in a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in November 2022.⁶ This partnership not only highlights the shared principles of both the AOIP and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) but also reaffirms the importance of maintaining ASEAN Centrality.

Their engagement has also been strengthened by the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity (2021-2025) which outlines the details of the cooperation in some areas such as trade and investment, connectivity, sustainable development, maritime security and people-to-people exchanges.⁷ The cooperation underlines India's reorientation to ASEAN as its strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific.

ASEAN and Germany have also been working together in various areas such as trade, investment, education and development cooperation. Although Germany is not an ASEAN Dialogue Partner, the country has been one of ASEAN's development cooperation partners that has been supporting ASEAN's community-building

efforts since 2017.⁸ To mark their deepening engagement, Germany joined the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 2020.⁹ In 2023 the Secretary-General of ASEAN met with the Minister of State at the Federal Office of Germany in an effort to strengthen the ASEAN-Germany Development Partnership.¹⁰

Given the extensive engagement between ASEAN, India and Germany, there is a need to forge closer ties and enhance their relationship, particularly in creating more inclusive policies in the Indo-Pacific through gender mainstreaming strategies. These countries have shared interests in the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment. Germany's commitment to promoting gender equality has been apparent in its recent introduction of new feminist foreign policy guidelines.¹¹ These policy guidelines aim to ensure that all people, including women, "have the same right to representation and access to resources".¹²

India is also involved in discussion and efforts towards incorporating gender equality and women's rights into its foreign affairs.¹³ ASEAN countries also demonstrate this intent. Indonesia for example has committed to the promotion of gender equality and women's rights in foreign affairs through increasing representation of Indonesian diplomats in foreign policymaking, and Indonesia's Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi has pushed for feminist diplomacy on the international stage.¹⁴

These are valuable starting points and foundations for a potential and deepening engagement. Disaster management and peace and security issues are areas of potential engagement, where a more inclusive approach would help Southeast Asia gain stability and resilience.

Disaster Management for Community Resilience

The Indo-Pacific region is home to a majority of the global population, including ASEAN member states, which are vulnerable to natural and man-made disasters such as floods, typhoons, droughts, as well as pandemics. Data from the ASEAN Disaster Information Network (ADINet) shows that 85% of disasters in the ASEAN region are caused by hydrometeorological hazards such as floods, storms and wind.¹⁵

In responding to these situations, ASEAN has prioritised building capacity to address natural hazards by establishing the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM) which plays a role in developing policies and strategies for disaster management in the ASEAN region. To facilitate cooperation and coordination among ASEAN member states, the United Nations, and international organisations for disaster management, ASEAN also established the ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Center). Germany, through GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH), has supported the process of regional integration by strengthening ASEAN's AHA Center with capacity development in disaster management.

While ASEAN has made significant progress in disaster management, there are several challenges in handling disasters effectively. One of the crucial challenges is the gender gap in disaster risk management. This can be achieved through strengthening the resilience of vulnerable groups including women and children by ensuring access to health and education facilities, addressing any special needs, and helping them rebuild their livelihoods after disasters.

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that caused casualties in India and several Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and Thailand highlighted the need for a multilateral disaster management mechanism in Southeast Asia, resulting in the adoption of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) in 2005. This agreement formed the basis for cooperation between ASEAN and other dialogue partners, including India, in disaster management. In dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, the ASEAN leaders adopted the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Frameworks (ACRF) as a policy framework to guide ASEAN's collective response to the pandemic and its impact on the region.

Promotion of Peace and Security for Regional Stability

Promoting the meaningful participation of women in fostering peace and security will also contribute to a stable Indo-Pacific region. Conflict and violence are issues that affect many countries in Asia, including in the form of subnational conflicts and inter-communal violence. The ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) was released in 2022. In Southeast Asia, the WPS agenda is particularly relevant due to the region's history of conflicts and ongoing security challenges. Despite the incredible commitment of ASEAN to promote inclusive peace and security in the region, the lack of women's participation and gender inequality remain issues in the region.

Although the Southeast Asia region is prone to conflict, only three countries have a National Action Plan on WPS: the Philippines in 2010, Indonesia in 2014, and Timor Leste in 2016. Meanwhile, other ASEAN countries have enacted many policies to boost progress on women, peace and security. In terms of the deployment of female peacekeepers, until 2019, there was an upward trend in the number of total deployed uniformed female personnel from some contributing countries in Southeast Asia. The increasing number is largely the result of participation from Indonesia, Cambodia and Malaysia. There is potential for ASEAN to collaborate with India and Germany to boost contributions of women in maintaining peace throughout the world.

India does not have a National Action Plan on WPS and it has been criticised for its inconsistency in the WPS agenda¹⁶, yet the country has shown commitment to gender through the significant number of female peacekeepers deployed. India deployed an all-female police unit to a UN peacekeeping mission in Liberia in 2007. India has also supported the UN's Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy, which advocates for increasing women peacekeepers.

India could share its experience with ASEAN in increasing women's participation in political and security discussion and disaster recovery which could potentially lead to conflict prevention in the future.¹⁷ Through the latest initiative on Women in United Nations Peacekeeping (UNPK) operations, India aims to train women peacekeepers of ASEAN member countries. Both ASEAN and India could also collaborate in achieving gender equality in domestic security, particularly in addressing the discrimination and violence against women and the practice of child marriage, which is still homework for them.

Given its experience as The Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) Champion in women, peace and security, Germany could partner with ASEAN member states in initiating some policy interventions or programs to raise the number of women serving in UN operations. These interventions include training troops and police with a focus on women in peacekeeping.

This area of cooperation is crucial not only in strengthening the rule-based international order in the Indo-Pacific region but also in bringing gender centrality into the conversation on the Indo-Pacific. In implementing this potential cooperation to centralise gender, one of the potential roadblocks will be gaps in gender data in the ASEAN region, including data on the achievements of gender equality programs across the countries in various sectors.

Therefore, improving data collection and analysis to inform ASEAN's policies on gender could be a strategic agenda of collaboration between ASEAN and other countries. Moreover, ASEAN needs to address intersectionality in its gender policies. It means that gender centrality initiatives should be inclusive, consider the diverse experiences and needs of individuals, and address the specific challenges of individuals based on their intersecting identities.

Conclusion

Given its vital and strategic role in the region, ASEAN should engage proactively in the growing conversation on gender issues in the Indo-Pacific. Together with India and Germany, ASEAN can develop mutually beneficial dialogues and partnerships in incorporating gender perspectives into areas of cooperation such as disaster management for community resilience and peace-security promotion for regional stability. Centralising gender in its Indo-Pacific strategies in these areas will not only provide opportunities for women/girls in the region to amplify their voice and be involved in a meaningful representation, but also help establish a gender-transformative and resilient ASEAN Community towards a 'community of caring societies', thus bringing further stability and prosperity in the region.

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About Kubernein Initiative:

Kubernein Initiative is an independent, female led, geopolitical advisory firm based in Mumbai, India, working to mainstream issues that need greater intellectual capacity and focus. Our vision is to build an organisation that considers critical questions with a perspective that balances traditionally 'western' thought in the field of international relations and diplomacy with new and emerging ideas from the global south.