Will ASEAN's Peace Agenda Include Women and Youth

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As Malaysia assumes the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025, it stands at a symbolic and strategic crossroads. The year marks the 25th anniversary of the Women, Peace & Security (WPS) agenda under UNSCR 1325 and the 10th anniversary of the Youth, Peace & Security (YPS) agenda under UNSCR 2250; both global frameworks challenge conventional notions of who defines and delivers peace and security.

Malaysia's chairmanship theme, "Inclusivity and Sustainability," suggests a progressive agenda, but a pressing question lingers after the 46th ASEAN Summit's reaffirmation of inclusive governance: Will Malaysia's WPS trajectory reflect bold leadership or default to diplomatic window-dressing?
This piece offers a reflection and analysis from the perspective of someone who has been directly involved in the drafting process of Malaysia's WPS National Action Plan, negotiating from the civil society side and witnessing firsthand the challenges, limitations, and possibilities of meaningful engagement.

Context of the Existing Draft

Malaysia first announced its intent to develop a National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS in 2022 — relatively late, considering global momentum around the agenda and ASEAN's adoption of a Regional Plan of Action on WPS that same year. Yet the process remains mired in inertia, with fragmented leadership and shifting ministerial responsibility.

The drafting pen has passed from the Ministry of Defence to Foreign Affairs, and now, officially, to the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development. While this might appear logical, the reality reflects deeper political fault lines: competing visions of what "peace" means and who gets to define it.
Rather than positioning WPS as a strategic security framework, Malaysia's draft reportedly leans heavily on gender-based violence and economic participation — vital issues, but only a partial reading of the agenda. At its core, WPS demands the redefinition of security: embedding women's leadership in foreign policy, crisis response, climate adaptation, and conflict resolution. Anything less risks reducing WPS to a welfare program — a seemingly toothless agenda

Nuances Observed From The Civil Society Organisation End

Much of Malaysia's engagement with the WPS agenda has been consultative in form but not in substance. Civil society organizations, particularly those working with women in conflict-affected or marginalized communities, are often invited to stakeholder briefings or dialogues. Yet these engagements are typically one-way, offering little room for genuine co-creation. While inputs may be acknowledged in reports or communiqués, they rarely shape actual policy.

This tokenistic inclusion reflects a deeper pattern: dialogue as a performance rather than a democratic process. The optics of engagement are carefully managed for international audiences, but domestically, decision-making remains centralized and politically cautious. Civil society is given a platform to speak, but not the power to shape. Even when feedback is collected, integration mechanisms are opaque or absent. The result? A WPS NAP developed in an echo chamber — privileging official narratives over lived realities.

This gap undermines both the legitimacy and effectiveness of the process. Without grounding in community realities, the NAP risks missing key priorities: how women face insecurity across intersecting identities, how their peacebuilding work remains informal and under-resourced, and how structural barriers continue to limit their agency.

Not limited to that, Malaysia's broader approach to WPS positions it more as an international talking point than a domestic strategy. This observation is evident should one monitor speeches conveyed by government officials in forums such as but not limited to the Beijing or CEDAW processes, or even in international defense exhibitions such as LIMA or DSA.

While commitments are showcased abroad and/or with foreign audiences involved, the agenda is largely disconnected from core national priorities like defense, diplomacy, and crisis response. This reflects a selective embrace of feminist principles — a kind of "feminism we can tolerate" — that avoids disrupting existing hierarchies or redistributing power.

State-led engagement with WPS tends to focus on safer, apolitical domains like economic participation or services for gender-based violence. Meanwhile, the more transformative elements, such as women's leadership in peace processes, disarmament, and security governance are sidelined. Framed as a technical issue under welfare ministries, WPS risks being treated as peripheral rather than central to national security planning.

The danger is clear: Malaysia's WPS NAP could become symbolic — a checklist for international credibility rather than a driver of systemic change. Without structural reform and political will, it risks becoming a diplomatic artifact rather than a meaningful tool for inclusion and peace.

Embracing the language of WPS without its disruptive intent dilutes its core purpose. WPS was never meant to be a branding exercise; it is a call to reimagine peace and security through justice, equity, and participation. If Malaysia continues to treat it as an external obligation, it will not only limit the agenda's impact but also miss a critical opportunity — not just to lead ASEAN in 2025, but to redefine what inclusive, gender-responsive peacebuilding can truly look like.

Similar Case But Different Approach: Comparison to Neighbours' Experiences of WPS NAP

Malaysia is not alone in its struggle to meaningfully implement the WPS agenda. Across ASEAN, WPS adoption and integration remain uneven, with significant gaps between commitment and execution. To date, only a handful of member states, including Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Timor-Leste, have developed and launched WPS NAP. Even among these, implementation varies widely in scope, depth, and political buy-in.

Across the region, WPS is often siloed within ministries of women, social welfare, or community development similar to the case of Malaysia. While these agencies are important, their limited scope and resources tend to confine WPS to protection and economic issues, sidelining its integration into defense, diplomacy, and national security.

Yet, there are instructive models within ASEAN that suggest alternative paths are not only possible but already underway. For instance, the Philippines has localized both the WPS and Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) agendas in post-conflict areas like Mindanao, integrating them into community governance, transitional justice, and grassroots peacebuilding led by women and youth. Indonesia, likewise, demonstrates inter-ministerial coordination by involving key agencies such as defense and foreign affairs in its WPS NAP, while promoting implementation through local governments. Though challenges remain, both cases show that inclusive, whole-of-government approaches to WPS are not only feasible but essential.

These examples are far from perfect, but they provide valuable lessons. First, meaningful implementation requires political leadership beyond the social sector. Second, localizing WPS and YPS through decentralized governance can enhance effectiveness and legitimacy. And third, aligning WPS with broader national and regional security agendas is not only a matter of principle but of pragmatism, especially in a region facing evolving and vast threats, from climate insecurity to digital violence and authoritarian resurgence.

For Malaysia, learning from these cases could offer a roadmap to move beyond rhetoric and toward institutional coherence. In doing so, it could help shift the regional narrative: from fragmented compliance to coordinated leadership.

Will the 2nd ASEAN WPS Summit in September Be The Turning Point?

Malaysia's next significant opportunity arrives this September when it hosts the 2nd ASEAN Women, Peace and Security Summit. This event holds the potential to be much more than a ceremonial gathering: it could mark a pivotal turning point that repositions WPS as a central pillar, rather than a peripheral issue, within ASEAN's broader political-security agenda.

The timing of this summit is particularly strategic. ASEAN recently launched its Political-Security Community (APSC) Strategic Plan 2045, which includes a clear mandate, specifically item 9.15, to elevate the implementation of WPS across the region. This directive presents Malaysia with a unique chance to embed WPS considerations into key regional security dialogues, from the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) to less formal, yet influential, Track II diplomacy and emerging areas like cyber policy. Doing so would signal a meaningful shift toward integrating gender perspectives into the core of ASEAN's security framework.

Crucially, for WPS to gain true traction, it must be linked explicitly with the Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) agenda. Across Southeast Asia, young women are actively engaged in building peace at the grassroots level, often behind the scenes and without formal recognition. Their efforts, while impactful, remain largely invisible and excluded from national and regional policy planning due to the absence of coherent frameworks. While Malaysia has acknowledged youth involvement, particularly in the context of countering violent extremism, it still lacks a comprehensive YPS strategy that meaningfully incorporates youth voices into security governance and decision-making processes.

In the months ahead, Malaysia faces a critical test. Its Chairmanship coincides with several major milestones, but also with real openings for substantive reforms. The key question is no longer whether Malaysia can successfully host inclusive, well-attended events. Instead, the challenge lies in whether Malaysia can institutionalize inclusive policies that ensure the voices of women and youth are embedded in security governance at all levels.

For the 2nd ASEAN WPS Summit to be more than ceremonial, Malaysia must translate rhetoric into structural reform, both at home and in the region. At the ASEAN level, this means embedding WPS and YPS into the heart of political security mechanisms, not confining them to social portfolios. A cross-sectoral WPS-YPS task force could ensure these agendas inform defense, diplomacy, and cyber policy—from the ADMM to Track II dialogues.

Domestically, Malaysia must treat WPS and YPS as strategic frameworks, not development programs. This requires a well-resourced, whole-of-government National Action Plan, shaped through meaningful civil society engagement, not just consultation for appearance's sake. Youth engagement must also evolve beyond counter-extremism rhetoric into broader roles in peacebuilding and governance.

Reform also demands accountability: clear indicators, inclusive budgeting, and mechanisms that give civil society not just a voice, but a seat at the decision-making table. Beyond this, WPS and YPS must be integrated into pressing security challenges climate threats, digital harm, and crisis response — where women and youth are already leading informally.

As Malaysia stands at the helm of ASEAN in a year marked by milestones for both the WPS and YPS agendas, it faces a pivotal choice: to merely draft peace or to democratize it. The 2nd ASEAN WPS Summit, if treated as more than a showcase, offers a rare chance to anchor inclusive security at the heart of regional policy. But without structural reform and genuine political will, Malaysia risks repeating a familiar pattern, where those most capable of building peace remain peripheral to its planning. The test of leadership in 2025 will not be how well Malaysia hosts the conversation, but whether it is prepared to shift power within it. True peace cannot be drafted without her — and it should never be drafted without them.

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