

Gender-responsive Diplomacy as ASEAN's Soft Power

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Abstract

The study analyzed how ASEAN articulates gender-responsive diplomacy as a soft-power instrument through strategic communication and its role as a norm entrepreneur at the regional and global levels. In the last decade, gender equality issues have become increasingly prominent on ASEAN's agenda, marked by the launch of the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework (AGMSF) 2021–2025 and the Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace, and Security (RPA-WPS) 2022. This study used a qualitative approach with discourse analysis of ASEAN documents from 2015 to 2025, including Chairman's Statements, Joint Communiqués, reports of the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC), and ASEAN speeches in global fora. Data was analyzed using document coding techniques using three categories: gender framing (equality, protection, empowerment, inclusion), ASEAN's strategic narrative (moral actor, partner, leader), and normative roles (agenda-setter, norm shaper, norm taker). The study reveals an evolution from normative rhetoric to more proactive diplomacy: in the 2015–2020 period, gender issues primarily emerged in protectionist and socio-cultural contexts, while since 2021, they have become a cross-pillar agenda emphasizing empowerment and regional leadership. However, a gap persists between diplomatic rhetoric and implementation at the national level, driven by political differences, limited institutional capacity, and norm resistance.

Keywords: ASEAN, gender-responsive diplomacy, soft power, norm entrepreneurship

Introduction

The issue of gender equality is gaining increasing attention in contemporary international relations. Diplomacy is no longer viewed solely as a realist practice focused on material power but as an arena for articulating norms, values, and identities (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Tickner & True, 2018). In the Southeast Asian context, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) seeks to build its image as a regional organization that prioritizes not only political stability and economic growth but also as a normative actor emphasizing inclusivity, social justice, and gender equality (Acharya, 2014; Clark et al., 2024).

Since its formation in 1967, ASEAN has been known primarily as a consensus-based political and security forum focused on regional stability (Narine, 2008). However, developments in the past two decades have shown that ASEAN is also beginning to address transnational social issues such as climate change, migration, and gender equality. In the gender realm, a significant milestone was the establishment of the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) in 2010, which serves as an institutional platform for advocacy and coordination on gender and children's issues in the region (ASEAN Secretariat, 2010). ASEAN is a powerful actor, demonstrating its power through language in shaping a distinct community and human rights within the region. It is active in contestation and collaboration within the framework of international relations (Stacey, 2020).

The 2015–2025 period marked a significant escalation in ASEAN's gender-focused diplomacy. First, the emergence of various policy instruments, such as the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework (AGMSF) 2021–2025, which emphasizes gender integration across ASEAN's three pillars: political-security, economic, and socio-cultural (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021). Second, the adoption of the Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace, and Security (RPA-WPS) in 2022 as a regional translation of the agenda of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and its derivatives (ASEAN, n.d.). These two documents mark a shift from a sectoral approach that places gender solely within the socio-cultural domain to a cross-sectoral approach that emphasizes the importance of a gender perspective in regional security and economic diplomacy.

However, there is a significant gap between rhetoric and implementation. On the one hand, ASEAN has increasingly raised gender issues in official documents such as Chairman's Statements and Joint Communiqués, positioning them as an element of soft power to portray ASEAN as a progressive and inclusive region (Nye, 2004). On the other hand, disparities in commitment among member states, limited institutional capacity, and patriarchal cultural resistance prevent many of ASEAN's gender-responsive diplomacy agendas from being consistently internalized at the national level (Qanti et al., 2022; Valerio et al., 2024)

Gender-responsive diplomacy can be understood as part of normative diplomacy that seeks to articulate the value of gender equality not only as a moral goal but also as a source of political legitimacy and international appeal (Aggestam & Towns, 2019; Tickner & True, 2018). More complexly, gender in diplomacy, by adding a dynamic and dialectical perspective on

gender identity, shows that a network of women diplomats is not merely a quantitative representation, but a strategic action in confronting and changing structures (Towns, 2022). Thus, ASEAN's gender-sensitive diplomacy can be seen as an effort to construct strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2014) that present ASEAN as a "normative actor" in the Indo-Pacific order.

This article analyzes ASEAN documents from 2015 to 2025, focusing on gender framing, strategic narratives, and normative roles. ASEAN will be examined in terms of how it positions gender-responsive diplomacy within a soft power framework and the dynamics between regional rhetoric and the reality of implementation. This article contributes to the literature on feminist international relations and Southeast Asian studies by providing a map of ASEAN's gender-responsive diplomacy over the past decade, demonstrating a transition from normative rhetoric to more proactive diplomacy. Theoretically, this article integrates the frameworks of soft power (Nye, 2004), feminist constructivism (Tickner & True, 2018), and norm entrepreneurship (Clark et al., 2024; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) to understand ASEAN's normative dynamics. Gender-responsive diplomacy is a moral issue and a strategic instrument for ASEAN to strengthen its legitimacy and international appeal.

Literature Review

Previous studies on ASEAN have focused more on the organization's role in regional security, economic integration, or multilateral diplomacy (Acharya, 2021; Narine, 2008). Studies specifically examining ASEAN's gender-responsive diplomacy are relatively limited. Some studies have focused on gender in the context of development or women's participation in the agricultural sector (Qanti et al., 2022; Valerio et al., 2024), as well as a global review of gender-based violence among primary producers (O'Mullan et al., 2024). The issue of migrant workers, with a focus on women, is also discussed in the context of upholding human rights, where ASEAN has formal commitments in key documents such as the ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, which contain inclusive norms and commitments on human rights, including gender equality, the protection of women, and sexuality (Eriyanti et al., 2022; Häbel et al., 2022; Weiss, 2021). However, studies that treat ASEAN's gender-perspective diplomacy as a soft power strategy and analyze it within the framework of entrepreneurship norms remain rare.

Gender-responsive Diplomacy in International Relations

Gender-responsive diplomacy is a perspective that positions gender as a constitutive dimension of diplomatic practice, determining who is included or excluded, how negotiations are conducted, and what agendas are prioritized (Aggestam & Towns, 2019). Gender shapes and is reproduced in diplomatic practices (Catriona, 2020). Several countries, such as Sweden, Canada, and Mexico, have adopted what is known as a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP), placing gender equality at the center of their diplomacy. This approach views diplomacy as a traditional foreign policy instrument and an arena for articulating feminist norms

emphasizing equality, inclusion, and social justice. Swedish public diplomats negotiate the meaning of feminism abroad by packaging the FFP message for broad acceptance, balancing policy radicalism with diplomatic consensus, and integrating feminism part of the economic development narrative into increase global acceptance (Karlsson, 2022). The European Union also uses gender issues as part of normative diplomacy, emphasizing gender mainstreaming in development policies and external cooperation (Muehlenhoff, 2017). Gender-responsive diplomacy is a moral commitment to human rights and political branding to strengthen the EU's normative image. A critical analysis of gender figurations in diplomacy is important because of its impact on diplomatic practice, the recognition of women's work, and the legitimacy of diplomatic institutions (Towns, 2020).

While the literature on global gender-responsive diplomacy is growing, studies on Southeast Asia remain limited. ASEAN, previously known for its consensus-based and non-interventionist ASEAN Way approach (Acharya, 2014). It is now beginning to articulate gender issues within a diplomatic framework. Research and practice in public diplomacy and nation branding increasingly focus on gender dynamics in critical and ethical ways, recognizing that performance, relationships, and caring are transformative keys that can lead to more equitable and inclusive international relations practices (Kaneva & Cassinger, 2022).

Soft Power and Regional Branding

The concept of soft power, developed by Joseph Nye, is relevant to understanding why ASEAN has raised gender issues in diplomacy. Soft power influences others through attraction, moral legitimacy, and values, rather than coercion or material incentives (Nye, 2004). In the ASEAN context, gender-responsive diplomacy is an instrument for building a regional image that is progressive, inclusive, and committed to human rights. Previous research shows that ASEAN frequently uses normative issues such as human rights, the environment, and gender to enhance its legitimacy in the eyes of international dialogue partners, including the European Union, the UN, and the United States Serikat (Jetschke & Murray, 2012). However, ASEAN's soft power is often criticized for being rhetorical, focusing more on political declarations than on concrete implementation (Jones & Smith, 2007). Therefore, examining whether ASEAN's gender-focused diplomacy is merely rhetoric or part of a regional branding strategy is important.

Feminist Constructivism

Constructivism in international relations stems from the view that international actors' identities, interests, and behaviors are shaped by social interactions and mutually agreed-upon norms (Wendt, 1992). However, this approach has been further enriched by a feminist perspective, highlighting how gender norms shape social structures and international identities. Tickner asserts that international relations cannot be fully understood without considering the gender dimensions inherent in political and diplomatic identity formation. This is where the feminist constructivism approach emerged, which positions gender-based

social relations as crucial in shaping global meanings, interests, and norms (Tickner & True, 2018).

The identities of states and international organizations are not fixed but are continuously constructed through social interactions. In this context, gender is not simply a social attribute, but an analytical category that influences how international actors understand security, power, and diplomacy (Tickner & True, 2018). Feminist constructivism demonstrates that international norms are often dominated by masculine values, marginalizing feminine values such as empathy, cooperation, and care. Thus, a feminist analysis of constructivism opens a space for understanding how gender relations shape the structure of international norms and influence diplomatic behavior between states (True, 2013).

In the Southeast Asian context, this thinking helps explain the emergence of ASEAN's gender-responsive diplomacy as part of efforts to build an inclusive, gender-equitable regional identity. Member states interact to shape new norms that place gender equality as a shared regional value. This process is evident in the formation of various policy instruments, such as the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) and the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021).

Furthermore, ASEAN's gender-responsive diplomacy can be seen as a strategy to build its image with global partners. An inclusive, gender-equal identity is a source of soft power that enhances ASEAN's appeal at international forums. By presenting itself as a regional organization committed to equality, ASEAN strengthens internal solidarity and expands its moral and diplomatic legitimacy globally. Regional identity is a social construct imbued with gendered meanings. Gender-responsive diplomacy is a policy tool that transforms values and norms, propelling ASEAN toward a more inclusive, just, and responsive community in response to global dynamics. ASEAN diplomacy can be understood as a social project that builds security, identity, and legitimacy based on gender equality at the regional and global levels.

Norm Dynamics: From Emergence to Internalization

The dynamics of international norms occur in three stages: emergence, cascade, and internalization. In the emergence stage, norm entrepreneurs introduce new norms and seek support. In the cascade stage, norms spread and are adopted by multiple actors. In the internalization stage, norms are considered taken-for-granted and are no longer contested (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). In the ASEAN context, gender-responsive diplomacy can be seen as part of the emergence and cascade of the gender equality agenda in the region. The ACWC, ACW, and the ASEAN Secretariat are norm entrepreneurs promoting gender integration into regional policies. However, whether gender norms have reached the internalization stage remains questionable, given resistance in some member states.

Norm Entrepreneurship and Organized Diffusion

The concept of norm entrepreneurship highlights the role of actors in driving the adoption of new norms. Organized diffusion is the process by which local change agents disseminate new norms in a structured manner through community and institutional networks (Clark et al., 2024). This concept is relevant to assessing how ASEAN attempts to export gender norms globally through multilateral diplomacy while simultaneously disseminating them to member states through regional policies. In the context of ASEAN gender-responsive diplomacy, the key question is whether ASEAN is truly a proactive norm entrepreneur or a follower adopting global agendas such as the WPS and SDGs.

Research Method

This study applies a qualitative approach, combining discourse analysis and document coding-based content analysis. The goal is not simply to count word frequencies, but to understand ASEAN's meaning, framing, and communication strategies regarding gender issues. Discourse analysis provides a platform for examining how ASEAN constructs strategic narratives about gender. In contrast, document coding provides a systematic basis for identifying patterns, trends, and shifts in ASEAN's gender-responsive diplomacy. This approach aligns with the feminist constructivist research tradition, which emphasizes the role of language, norms, and identity in shaping international practice (Tickner & True, 2018). Thus, this methodology is descriptive and analytical: it assesses how texts and narratives in ASEAN documents function as instruments of soft power.

This study's analysis unit is official ASEAN documents issued between 2015 and 2025. This period was selected because it marks a significant shift: from normative gender rhetoric (2015–2020) to a phase of institutionalization and proactive diplomacy (2021–2025), coinciding with the birth of the AGMSF and the RPA-WPS. The analysis includes (1) Chairman's Statements from ASEAN Summits (2015–2025); (2) Joint Communiqués of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers (AMM) (2015–2025); (3) Institutional documents related to gender that include ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework (AGMSF) 2021–2025, ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security (RPA-WPS) 2022, and ASEAN Regional Guidelines on Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Services 2016 (updated 2024); (4) Annual reports of the ASEAN Commission on Women (ACW) and the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC); and (5) ASEAN speeches at international forums (UNGA, G20, APEC) that address gender issues (2015–2025).

In addition to official ASEAN documents available on the ASEAN Secretariat, ACWC, and ACW websites, data are compiled from development partner reports, speeches, and press releases from the ASEAN Secretariat and the ASEAN Chair each year. Data analysis is conducted using Thematic Coding using a framework of three main categories.

The first category is gender framing and includes four dimensions: equality, emphasizing equal rights for women and men; empowerment, emphasizing women's economic, political, and leadership advancement; protection, emphasizing protection from violence, discrimination, and vulnerability; and inclusion, emphasizing women's participation in decision-making processes.

The second category is ASEAN strategic narrative. This category includes moral actor, portraying ASEAN as a guardian of human rights and equality; partner, emphasizing ASEAN cooperation with external actors such as the United Nations, the European Union, and Japan; and leader, positioning ASEAN as a regional pioneer or champion of gender equality.

The third category is normative role (norm entrepreneurship). The category includes agenda-setter, where ASEAN initiates gender policy; norm-shaper, where ASEAN adapts global norms to the regional context; and norm taker, where ASEAN adopts global norms without significant modification.

The coding process is carried out by thoroughly reading the documents to identify the context of gender issues, highlighting relevant paragraphs and coding them according to the categories above, calculating the frequency of themes to identify trends, and interpretively analyzing how narratives are framed and linked to soft power. To increase coding efficiency, the NVivo application is used.

Analysis

The Evolution of ASEAN Gender-Responsive Diplomacy 2015–2025

An analysis of official ASEAN documents from 2015 to 2025 reveals interesting normative dynamics related to gender-responsive diplomacy. In the initial phase (2015–2020), gender discourse in ASEAN documents tended to be positioned within a protectionist framework. This is evident in the Chairman's Statement of the 27th ASEAN Summit (2015), which emphasized that ASEAN reaffirms its commitment to protect women and children from all forms of violence, exploitation, and discrimination (ASEAN, 2015). This statement portrays women as a vulnerable group in need of protection, rather than as equal political or economic agents.

This tendency is inseparable from ASEAN's view of gender issues within a broader socio-cultural framework. During that period, the main issues raised were human trafficking, the protection of female migrant workers, and domestic violence. For example, in the Joint Communiqué of the 49th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, ASEAN mentioned the importance of enhancing protection mechanisms for migrant workers, particularly women and children, who are vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking (ASEAN, 2017b).

However, significant changes occurred in the subsequent period (2021–2025). Establishing the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework (AGMSF) 2021–2025 and the Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security (RPA-WPS) 2022 marked a

significant transition from a protectionist paradigm to one of empowerment and inclusion. In the Chairman's Statement of the 38th and 39th ASEAN Summits (2021), for example, it was emphasized that "We underscored the importance of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in driving ASEAN's recovery and sustainable development" (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021)

There has been renewed recognition of women as important actors, not simply objects of protection. The growing narrative of empowerment is also evident in the RPA-WPS (2022) document, which states that "ASEAN recognizes women as agents of peace and security, and commits to ensuring their meaningful participation in conflict prevention, resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction" (ASEAN, n.d.-a). This shift does not occur instantly, but is influenced by internal and external factors. Internal factors include pressure from the ACWC and ACW to broaden the scope of gender issues. In contrast, external factors relate to the strong push from development partners such as the European Union, the UN, and Japan, which linked development assistance to the gender equality agenda (Jetschke & Murray, 2012). Thus, ASEAN is adapting to global demands and attempting to build a new normative identity in the region. The coding results of 68 ASEAN documents support this finding. Of the documents from 2015–2020, 72% of gender framings were categorized as protection, while only 20% emphasized empowerment. In contrast, documents published between 2021 and 2025 showed that 51% of documents emphasized empowerment and 36% emphasized inclusion, although protection remained prominent in 55% of documents. This data demonstrates a clear shift in narrative from women as victims to women as leaders.

Gender Framing: From Protection to Empowerment

In the protection phase (2015–2020), gender issues in ASEAN documents predominantly emerged within a protection framework. Women were positioned as a group that must be protected from external and internal threats, such as human trafficking, exploitation of migrant workers, and gender-based violence. In the Chairman's Statement of the 27th ASEAN Summit in 2015, an explicit statement affirmed ASEAN's commitment to "protect women and children from all forms of violence, exploitation, and discrimination" (ASEAN, 2015)

Three things stand out from this framing: (1) Women as victims, where ASEAN views women primarily in their capacity as vulnerable parties. This is evident in the Joint Communiqué of the 49th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in 2016, which emphasized the need to enhance protection for female migrant workers (ASEAN, 2017b). (2) Gender issues were placed within the socio-cultural realm. Almost all documents from this period placed gender issues within sub-chapters related to human rights and socio-cultural issues, rarely linking them to security or the economy. (3) The narrative was conservative and defensive. The dominant keywords were protection, vulnerability, and support, indicating a reactive rather than transformative policy orientation. This analysis is consistent with the literature that suggests that ASEAN often adopts normative issues merely as symbolic rhetoric (Jones & Smith, 2007).

Towards the end of transition phase (2018-2020), signs of a shift emerged. The 2018 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Women (AMMW) mentioned "promoting women's participation in decision-making" (ASEAN, 2018). While still limited, this mention marked a slight shift toward recognizing women as actors rather than objects of protection. However, this transition phase was not yet robust because it lacked a clear institutional framework. Many clauses were merely declaratory and reiterated global agendas, such as the SDGs, without incorporating Southeast Asia's local context.

A major transformation occurred between 2021 and 2025 in empowerment and leadership phase. Two important documents served as its main pillars. First is the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework (AGMSF) 2021–2025. This document affirms gender as a cross-cutting principle in politics, security, and economics. For the first time, ASEAN has incorporated gender into the pillars of the digital economy and post-COVID recovery. Second is the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security (RPA-WPS) 2022. This document recognizes women as agents of peace, committed to ensuring their participation in conflict prevention, resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction.

Furthermore, the Chairman's Statement of the 38th and 39th ASEAN Summits in 2021 emphasized the importance of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in driving ASEAN's recovery and sustainable development (ASEAN, 2021). This shift demonstrates that gender issues are now viewed as part of development and diplomatic strategies.

The shift in framing from protection to empowerment has several important implications. First, it reflects changes in ASEAN's identity. By emphasizing empowerment, ASEAN seeks to build a new identity as a progressive region, consistent with Tickner and True's (2018) feminist constructivism theory, which emphasizes the role of gender norms in shaping identity. Second, the new framing positions gender as an instrument of diplomacy. This strengthens ASEAN's normative appeal in the eyes of partners such as the European Union and the United Nations, reinforcing its position as a soft power actor (Nye, 2004). Third is potential implementation gaps. Despite the shift in narrative, implementation at the national level is not yet uniform.

The shift in framing demonstrates the normative dynamics described by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998): (1) Emergence, where gender norms initially emerge as protection; (2) Cascade, where the empowerment agenda begins to be adopted after 2021; and (3) Toward internalization, which remains questionable, as many member states have not yet fully implemented it. Meanwhile, Clark et al. (2024) refer to this process as organized diffusion, in which ASEAN systematically disseminates gender norms through regional instruments. However, its effectiveness still depends on national commitment.

ASEAN's Strategic Narrative

Strategic narratives are a crucial part of ASEAN diplomacy. Miskimmon et al. (2013) define strategic narratives as efforts by political actors to influence domestic and international

audiences through the construction of consistent normative narratives. In the context of gender-responsive diplomacy, ASEAN has developed three main narratives: moral actor, partner, and leader.

Since 2015, ASEAN has frequently used gender issues to portray itself as a moral organization aligned with international human rights norms. For example, the Joint Communiqué of the 52nd ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in 2019 states that ASEAN reaffirms its commitment to upholding the rights of women and girls as an integral part of human rights (ASEAN, 2019). This narrative portrays ASEAN as a guardian of moral values consistent with international conventions such as CEDAW and the SDGs. In this way, ASEAN seeks to enhance its normative legitimacy on the global stage.

The second dominant narrative is that of ASEAN as a partner to global organizations and donor countries. This is evident in the ASEAN-EU Strategic Partnership Joint Statement in 2020, which emphasized a commitment to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment as cross-cutting priorities in our partnership (ASEAN, 2020). In this context, gender is a "diplomatic currency" that strengthens ASEAN's cooperation with the European Union, the UN, Japan, Australia, and other external partners. Development partners typically demand a gender agenda as a prerequisite for aid, so ASEAN uses it to deepen diplomatic relations. Another example is the ASEAN-UN Joint Statement on Women, Peace and Security in 2021, which affirms ASEAN's commitment to implementing UN resolutions related to women-to-human rights (ASEAN, 2017c). This demonstrates that gender issues are an internal agenda and a negotiating tool in external relations.

The third narrative, which emerged strongly after 2021, is ASEAN as a leader in regional gender-focused diplomacy. The Chairman's Statement of the 42nd ASEAN Summit 2023 emphasized that ASEAN strives to lead by example in mainstreaming gender perspectives across all three pillars of our Community (ASEAN, 2023). This statement marks a significant shift. ASEAN is no longer simply following the global agenda but is seeking to position itself as a normative pioneer in Southeast Asia. By launching the AGMSF and the RPA-WPS, ASEAN claims normative leadership in gender mainstreaming. However, a critical question is how much this leadership narrative is supported by actual implementation. Some member states still resist the gender agenda. Myanmar, for example, is facing a political crisis that has deprioritized gender issues. On the other hand, the Philippines has been relatively progressive in implementing its National WPS Action Plan, which is consistent with the regional agenda.

The distribution of ASEAN narratives can be mapped as follows: (1) Moral Actor (2015–2019): dominant, appearing in almost all Joint Communiqués and Chairman's Statements; (2) Partner (2018–2022): significantly increasing, especially in ASEAN-EU, ASEAN-UN, and ASEAN-Australia cooperation; (3) Leader (2021–2025): emerging strongly, especially after the launch of the AGMSF and RPA-WPS. These three narratives are not interchangeable; instead, they are layered. ASEAN uses the moral narrative for internal legitimacy, the partner narrative to strengthen external relations, and the leader narrative to build its global brand.

ASEAN's strategic narrative can be seen as a form of soft power diplomacy. By leveraging gender issues, ASEAN seeks to build a positive image as a region aligned with

international norms. However, several weaknesses exist. First is the gap between rhetoric and reality, where substantive policies often do not follow the moral narrative. For example, despite ASEAN's stated commitment to women's human rights, some member states still have discriminatory policies. Second is dependence on External Partners, where the partner narrative suggests that the gender agenda is often influenced by donor pressure. This raises questions about whether ASEAN is a norm entrepreneur or a norm taker. Third is weak leadership, where the leader's narrative has only emerged since 2021 and is still in its infancy. The challenge is ensuring that ASEAN is not only a pioneer in rhetoric but also in practical implementation.

From a feminist constructivist perspective, this narrative suggests that gender issues are shaping ASEAN's identity. Its identity as a moral actor, partner, and leader reflects ASEAN's efforts to build legitimacy and international recognition. Meanwhile, from a norm entrepreneurship perspective, ASEAN operates on a dual spectrum: sometimes as a norm taker, sometimes as a norm shaper, and only recently as an agenda-setter.

ASEAN's Normative Role

In the theory of the norm life cycle, Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) divide norm dynamics into three stages: emergence, cascade, and internalization. In the initial stage, norm entrepreneurs introduce new ideas. In the next stage, norms spread and are adopted by other actors (cascade). Finally, norms are internalized and become taken for granted. In the ASEAN context, gender issues are clearly in the emergence and cascade stages, but have not yet reached complete internalization. Differences in commitments among member states mean that gender norms have not yet been fully accepted or automatic across the region. ASEAN can be categorized into three normative roles: agenda-setter, norm-shaper, and norm-taker.

ASEAN has demonstrated its capacity as an agenda-setter in several instances, most notably through the ACWC. In 2016, the ACWC launched the ASEAN Regional Guidelines on Violence Against Women and Girls Services, which were updated in 2024. This document provides service standards for victims of gender-based violence in Southeast Asia, including health, psychosocial, legal, and emergency protection protocols (ASEAN, 2017a; ASEAN, 2024). UN Women recognized these guidelines as good practices in the Asia-Pacific region. ASEAN demonstrated its agenda-setting capacity by developing reference standards and creating new norms grounded in regional experience (UN Women, 2024).

Agenda-setting is also evident in the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on WPS 2022. Although WPS is a global agenda, the RPA-WPS adds local elements, emphasizing internal conflicts, humanitarian crises, and natural disasters unique to Southeast Asia. This demonstrates that ASEAN is adopting and adding new normative content relevant to its context.

In many cases, ASEAN acts as a norm shaper, adopting global norms and adapting them to its principles, particularly consensus and non-intervention (the ASEAN Way). Adopting the WPS agenda is the most obvious example. UN Resolution 1325 (2000) emphasized the role

of women in peacekeeping operations. However, in the 2022 WPS-RPA, ASEAN avoided the term "peacekeeping" as it was deemed too sensitive for member states. Instead, ASEAN used the terms "conflict prevention" and "post-conflict reconstruction," which are more in line with the principle of non-intervention (ASEAN, n.d.). This demonstrates how ASEAN is reshaping global norms to align with regional political culture. Thus, ASEAN acts as a norm shaper, not simply copying norms but adapting them for domestic acceptance.

Despite its achievements as an agenda-setter and shaper, ASEAN still functions as a norm-taker in many instances. For example, the 2018 AMMW essentially replicated the language of the SDGs, such as "leave no one behind" or "achieving gender equality by 2030" (ASEAN, 2018). No significant innovations were indicating contextual adjustments. A similar trend was observed in several Joint Communiqués of Foreign Ministers (2015–2019), reiterating commitments to CEDAW and the SDGs without incorporating regional strategies. In these cases, ASEAN merely adopted international norms to demonstrate symbolic compliance, lacking the capacity to set agendas.

The coding results for the 2015–2025 documents show the following role distribution: (1) Agenda-setters were present in 15% of documents, primarily from the ACWC and RPA-WPS; (2) Norm shapers were found in 40% of documents, primarily in the adoption of WPS and SDGs modified according to the ASEAN Way; (3) Norm takers were found in 45% of documents, primarily in political statements and general declarations. This distribution shows that ASEAN remains more often a norm-taker, although its capacity as a shaper has begun to strengthen since 2021.

ASEAN's normative role can be understood through two dimensions. First is internal cohesion versus external legitimacy. As a norm-taker, ASEAN focuses more on external legitimacy, presenting itself in line with global norms for image purposes. Furthermore, as a norm-shaper, ASEAN seeks to maintain internal cohesion by modifying norms to better align with regional political culture. Second is capacity-building versus symbolic adoption. Agenda-setting requires institutional capacity and resources that are currently limited in the ACWC and ACW. Norm-taking is easier because it only requires a political declaration. This situation highlights ASEAN's dilemma: if it relies too much on normative rhetoric, ASEAN risks being perceived as a symbolic actor. However, if it can strengthen its agenda-setting, ASEAN has the potential to become a global pioneer in gender-responsive diplomacy.

In line with Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), ASEAN is still in the gender norm cascade stage. Internalization has not yet been achieved due to resistance within member states. Refer to Clark et al. (2024), this process is defined as organized diffusion. The ACWC serves as a diffusion agent, but its impact remains limited to harmonization rather than substantive compliance. Furthermore, from a feminist perspective, ASEAN's identity as a normative organization is negotiated through this role.

Comparatively, the 2015–2020 and 2021–2025 periods saw the formation of different normative narratives. In the protection phase of 2015–2020, the narrative was dominated by protection and human rights. Gender was placed solely within the socio-cultural pillar, followed by high rhetoric but low implementation. Meanwhile, in the empowerment and

inclusion phase of 2021–2025, gender has been incorporated into the political, security, and economic sectors. The empowerment and inclusion narrative dominates, and ASEAN is beginning to claim normative leadership.

Although ASEAN's narrative is increasingly progressive, implementation at the national level remains variable. The Philippines pioneered the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (NAP WPS), which aligns with the ASEAN WPS RPA. Indonesia has also progressed through the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection. However, Myanmar and Cambodia still lag in integrating the gender agenda. This demonstrates a significant implementation gap. In other words, ASEAN's gender-focused diplomacy is stronger in rhetoric than in practice.

The increasing empowerment and inclusion are also driven by pressure from external partners. The European Union, through the EU-ASEAN Cooperation Facility program, emphasizes gender equality as a prerequisite for development cooperation (ASEAN, 2020). Similarly, the UN, through UN Women, actively supports the implementation of the RPA-WPS. Thus, some of ASEAN's empowerment agendas are more donor-driven than purely internal initiatives. ASEAN uses gender issues as part of its branding strategy. ASEAN strengthens its position in the Indo-Pacific geopolitical competition by presenting itself as a progressive region. Gender is a soft power instrument that enhances ASEAN's legitimacy in the eyes of global partners. However, this branding risks becoming a normative fade if not followed by substantive changes on the ground.

The shift in ASEAN's gender framing aligns with the feminist constructivism perspective, which emphasizes the role of gender norms in identity formation. Mentions of equality, empowerment, and inclusion in official documents shape ASEAN's identity as an inclusive organization. ASEAN's role can be understood through the theory of norm entrepreneurship. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) state that norm entrepreneurs must link new norms to existing interests. ASEAN has linked women's empowerment to post-COVID economic recovery and regional security stability. However, Clark et al. (2024) caution that norm diffusion requires strong institutional support. The ACWC and ACW play important roles as diffusion agents, but their capacity remains limited.

According to Nye (2004), soft power stems from values and moral legitimacy. ASEAN has attempted to leverage gender issues as a soft power instrument, but its effectiveness remains limited due to implementation gaps. In other words, ASEAN has soft-power potential, but its credibility depends on consistently implementing gender norms across its member states. Many challenges remain for ASEAN to face in this regard, including: (1) political disparities among member states. The Philippines has been a pioneer with its National Action Plan (NAP) for WPS since 2010, which aligns with the ASEAN RPA WPS 2022. The Philippines has consistently included women in peace diplomacy and security operations, so the credibility of ASEAN's gender-responsive diplomacy depends heavily on its contributions. Indonesia has demonstrated a strong commitment through its Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (PPPA) and its gender mainstreaming policy in development. However, patriarchal cultural resistance and regional implementation gaps

limit effectiveness (Qanti et al., 2022). Vietnam is progressive in international diplomacy, often emphasizing the role of women in sustainable development. However, at the domestic level, policies still place women primarily in family and social roles, rather than political-security roles (Valerio et al., 2024). Meanwhile, Myanmar has experienced severe stagnation since the 2021 military coup. Gender issues have been a low priority, although ASEAN strives to promote a protection agenda through humanitarian assistance (ASEAN, n.d.). This comparison shows that ASEAN struggles to internalize gender norms without a shared national commitment. ASEAN's gender-responsive diplomacy is intense in regional rhetoric but weak in domestic implementation. (2) Patriarchal cultural resistance that conditions society to still view gender equality as a foreign agenda; (3) Limited institutional capacity, where the ACWC and ACW have normative mandates but lack enforcement mechanisms.

However, it must be acknowledged that ASEAN has the potential to become a global norm entrepreneur if it can strengthen its agenda-setting. Furthermore, collaboration with the EU and the UN can strengthen normative capacity. Gender-responsive diplomacy can enhance ASEAN's position in the Indo-Pacific contest with China and the US, which have not prioritized gender agendas. Gender norms shape ASEAN's regional identity. This identity is negotiated through the moral narratives of actors, partners, and leaders, although it remains overshadowed by internal inconsistencies. From a norm entrepreneurship perspective, ASEAN moves between norm taker and norm shaper, with agenda-setting capacity beginning to develop through the ACWC. This process consists of organized diffusion, in which gender norms are disseminated through regional networks but are not yet fully internalized. In practice, ASEAN needs to strengthen the mandate of the ACWC/ACW with clear evaluation and accountability mechanisms. Furthermore, gender-responsive diplomacy should not be donor-driven alone but be linked to the real needs of Southeast Asian communities, such as protecting female migrant workers, climate adaptation, and digital inclusion. If adopted, ASEAN can enhance its credibility as a global normative entrepreneur and strengthen its soft power position amidst the Indo-Pacific contestation.

Deconstructing ASEAN's Gender-Responsive Diplomacy Through a Feminist Lens

The evolution of ASEAN's gender-responsive diplomacy from 2015 to 2025 shows a promising shift, from a protectionist framing (72% in 2015–2020) to empowerment and inclusion (51% and 36% in 2021–2025). Documents such as AGMSF 2021–2025 and RPA-WPS 2022 position women as agents of peace in conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction, contrasting with prior narratives framing women as vulnerable victims of trafficking and domestic violence. However, from a feminist perspective, this evolution appears as feminist washing, the strategic deployment of progressive gender language to perpetuate patriarchal structures, in which the ASEAN Way's consensus-based non-intervention shields member states from substantive accountability.

In the protection phase from 2015 to 2020, dominant framing reproduced the classic gender dichotomy that women are weak objects requiring masculine protection from states or the international community. The Chairman's Statement of the 27th ASEAN Summit (2015) affirmed commitments to protect women from "violence, exploitation, and discrimination,"

while the Joint Communiqué of the 49th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (2016) highlighted vulnerabilities of female migrant workers. This narrative confines gender issues to the socio-cultural pillar, rarely linking them to masculine domains of security or economy that dominate ASEAN diplomacy. Feminists underscore the destructive implications by positioning women as passive victims (Eriyanti et al., 2024). ASEAN reproduces patriarchal hierarchies that deny women's agency as political actors while evading critique of structural failures such as migrant wage disparities or women's labor exploitation in regional supply chains.

The post-2021 shift to empowerment, marked by AGMSF and RPA-WPS, appears transformative. Gender is now cross-cutting across the three pillars (political-security, economic, socio-cultural), recognizing women as contributors to post-COVID recovery. The Chairman's Statement of the 38th and 39th ASEAN Summits 2021 emphasized "gender equality and women's empowerment" for sustainable development. However, through a feminist lens, this remains a pragmatic reconstruction of ASEAN's identity rather than an emancipatory one. The "leader" narrative in the Chairman's Statement of the 42nd ASEAN Summit 2023 claims gender mainstreaming, yet normative role distributions betray its ambitions. ASEAN acts more as a norm-taker (45%) than an agenda-setter (15%), adapting WPS to avoid "peacekeeping" in line with the ASEAN Way. This reflects half-hearted, organized diffusion, in which global norms (UNSCR 1325) are reshaped for external legitimacy but fail to be internalized amid patriarchal resistance in Myanmar and Cambodia.

ASEAN's strategic narratives as moral actor, partner, and leader bolster feminist critiques of Nye's (2004) soft power as neoliberal hegemony. As a moral actor (ASEAN, 2019), ASEAN aligns with CEDAW/SDGs for global legitimacy; as a partner (ASEAN-EU Statement 2020), gender becomes diplomatic currency to secure aid from the EU, UN, and Japan. The post-2021 leader narrative hinges on external pressures, rendering gender agendas donor-driven rather than authentic. This dependency, as neo-imperialism, ASEAN, representing Global South states, adopts Western feminism for Indo-Pacific branding while neglecting intersectionality, e.g., poor, ethnic-minority female migrant workers from the Philippines and Indonesia remain exploited, untouched by RPA-WPS.

Implementation gaps confirm Finnemore and Sikkink's (2019) norm cycle stalled at the cascade stage, not at internalization. The Philippines leads with its NAP-WPS since 2010, while Indonesia leads via the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection. On other hand, post-2021 coup Myanmar sidelines gender amid the political crisis; Vietnam is diplomatically progressive but domestically patriarchal. ACWC/ACW, as norm entrepreneurs, are hampered by institutional capacity and patriarchal cultures that view equality as a foreign agenda. Feminists demand deeper scrutiny, without quotas for female diplomats <20% in ASEAN for currently, or mandatory gender budgets, this diplomacy remains symbolic, reinforcing state masculinity over inclusive femininity (Alami,2023).

Conclusions

An analysis of ASEAN documents for the 2015–2025 period reveals a significant evolution in the region's gender-responsive diplomacy. In 2015–2020, gender issues were primarily framed within the protection framework, positioning women as a vulnerable group needing protection. However, since 2021, with the introduction of the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework 2021–2025 and the Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security 2022, the narrative has shifted significantly. ASEAN has begun emphasizing empowerment and inclusion, positioning women as recipients of protection and as important actors in development, security, and diplomacy.

The terms empowerment and inclusion have increased sharply, while protection remains prominent but no longer dominant. Strategically, ASEAN has developed three main narratives: (1) as a moral actor upholding human rights norms; (2) as a partner leveraging gender issues to strengthen relations with external partners; and (3) as a leader beginning to claim a leadership role in regional gender diplomacy.

However, a gap remains evident between regional rhetoric and national implementation. ASEAN's gender diplomacy often functions as a strategic narrative for external legitimacy rather than as a truly internalized norm across member states. Most member states have not fully adopted the WPS action plan or cross-sector gender integration. This suggests that ASEAN still operates in a norm-shaper and norm-taker role. However, it is beginning to show signs of becoming a norm entrepreneur on specific issues, such as VAWG services and the gender agenda in the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response AADMER.

There is an evolutionary map of ASEAN's gender diplomacy, based on coding official documents from 2015 to 2025, demonstrating a significant shift from protectionist to empowering rhetoric. Theoretically, this article integrates the frameworks of soft power, feminist constructivism, and norm entrepreneurship to explain ASEAN's normative dynamics. This article demonstrates that gender-responsive diplomacy can serve a dual purpose: as an instrument for regional branding and an effort to achieve social justice. However, its effectiveness depends heavily on consistent implementation at the member state level.

ASEAN must ensure that gender-responsive diplomacy is not merely rhetorical but translated into concrete monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Then, the ACWC and ACW must strengthen their mandate as norm entrepreneurs to accelerate the diffusion of gender norms in the region. Furthermore, ASEAN needs to capitalize on the geopolitical momentum in the Indo-Pacific to position itself as a leader in gender norms, rather than merely a follower of the global agenda. ASEAN's gender-responsive diplomacy is an additional moral issue and part of a soft power strategy that strengthens the region's position in the global order. The question that remains is no longer whether ASEAN will use gender as an instrument of diplomacy, but to what extent this diplomacy can translate into real change that goes beyond rhetoric and truly shapes an inclusive, gender-equitable regional identity.

Unlike state-led FFP in Sweden/Canada, ASEAN exemplifies hybridity, rhetorically progressive yet bound by collective patriarchy. ASEAN needs to be encouraged to: (1) bolster ACWC mandates with enforcement; (2) integrate intersectionality into RPA-WPS for migrants/ethnic minorities; (3) enforce gender quotas in the ASEAN Way consensus. Failure risks a normative fade, undermining ASEAN's soft power amid US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. Theoretically, it enriches feminist constructivism with empirical evidence that ASEAN's regional identity is negotiated via gender norms, yet trapped in global patriarchal structures.

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