

BREAKING BARRIERS AND BUILDING PATHWAYS FOR WOMEN IN ASEAN MILITARY LEADERSHIP



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Executive summary

This research explores obstacles and opportunities for women's meaningful participation in leadership roles within the armed forces of ASEAN Member States (AMS).

Gender equality in military leadership aligns with international frameworks including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), UN Security Council Resolution 1325, and ASEAN's Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security (RPA WPS). In Southeast Asia, as in many parts of the world, military leadership remains predominantly masculine. Currently, women's representation in AMS militaries ranges from approximately 3% in Vietnam to 13% in Malaysia, considerably lower than comparable figures in Australia (20.4%), New Zealand (20.3%), and the United States (17.5%). Data on women in senior military positions is scarce, though the Philippines stands out with women comprising 21% of leadership positions.

Women in AMS face significant institutional barriers to military leadership advancement:

- Access to military academies remains a major issue, with some countries only recently admitting women and while others still exclude them. Since academy training builds peer networks essential to career progression, exclusion puts women at a lasting disadvantage.
- Similarly, restrictions on combat roles—often essential for senior promotion—further hinder women's advancement due to gender stereotypes, cultural norms, and religious limitations. Professional military education has also been limited for women, with progress often driven by external pressure rather than genuine institutional support.
- Even when formal barriers are removed, deeply rooted gender bias continues to impede women's promotion. Despite meeting qualifications, women are frequently overlooked, reinforcing the view of the military as a “man's world.”
- Women often shoulder primary caregiving responsibilities, which complicates their ability to compete equally. While some navigate these challenges with external support, they still face systemic disadvantages compared to their male counterparts.
- Gendered role assumptions often channel women into roles like administration and healthcare, which offer stability but limit access to leadership. This occupational segregation, or “pink ghetto,” restricts influence.
- Gender-based violence and harassment further hinder advancement, with under-reporting common due to fear of reprisal—especially when offenders are senior. These dynamics reinforce unequal power and discourage women's career progression.

Despite these challenges, several promising approaches have emerged across the region. Peacekeeping operations provide women with crucial field experience and leadership opportunities otherwise unavailable in traditional military structures. Cambodia's deployment of 627 troops, including 130 women across four countries, with women leading contingents in South Sudan and Lebanon, demonstrates how international service can create pathways for women's advancement. Policy reforms in countries like the Philippines have shown significant progress, with 128 women among 350 cadets selected for the Philippine Military Academy in 2023, and seven women among the top ten graduates in 2024. These structural changes, when consistently implemented, create sustainable pathways for women's leadership development.









International education has proven particularly valuable, with eleven of fifteen interviewed women officers having undertaken higher education or professional military education in Australia. These experiences expanded their professional networks, enhanced language skills, and built confidence necessary for leadership roles. Exposure to military cultures with more advanced gender integration provides both practical skills and alternative models for women's military leadership.

The continued marginalisation of women from military leadership positions has far-reaching consequences. Persistent employment discrimination undermines organisational diversity and inclusivity, limiting the military's ability to draw from the full talent pool available. Policy stagnation results from homogeneous leadership perspectives, restricting opportunities for gender-responsive reforms that could benefit all service members. The gender pay gap is reinforced as women remain excluded from higher-paid positions and combat-related allowances, creating lifetime earnings disparities.

Sexual and gender-based violence and harassment continue in environments where women lack representation in senior leadership positions, perpetuating cultures where misconduct is underreported and inadequately addressed. Peacekeeping operations suffer reduced effectiveness without diverse perspectives, limiting the military's ability to connect with varied populations in deployment areas and undermining mission success in complex environments.

Recommendations

While recognising that some these challenges and obstacles to women's full participation in the armed services are not unique to ASEAN, the following recommendations are offered:

-  ASEAN militaries should redefine leadership as gender-neutral by challenging traditional assumptions through education and policy reform.
-  Women's participation in decision-making must be increased, especially in human resources, training, education policy, and promotion boards, to counter unconscious bias.
-  Mandatory gender training should raise awareness and establish clear mechanisms to report and address violations.
-  Formal mentorship programs can support women's advancement by connecting junior officers with experienced leaders.
-  An ASEAN Senior Women Officer Network should be established to facilitate regional dialogue and share best practices.
-  Family support policies, including employer-supported childcare and the promotion of gender-equitable care responsibilities, are key to improving work-life balance.
-  Expanded training and English language access, in collaboration with ASEAN Dialogue Partners, would strengthen women's eligibility for international roles and leadership opportunities.
-  ASEAN Member States should increase their deployment of women peacekeepers, as this offers crucial field experience and leadership opportunities for women in the military.

These interconnected strategies, implemented consistently over time, could transform military institutions across ASEAN to better reflect the societies they serve and harness the full potential of all their personnel, regardless of gender.

Introduction

This research project explores how to break down barriers and build pathways for women to take on meaningful leadership roles in the armed forces across ASEAN Member States (AMS). By gathering and analysing data, the study aims to uncover the obstacles women face, evaluate the support networks in place, and spotlight successful practices that can be adapted and scaled regionally to foster greater inclusion and gender equity in military leadership.

Why women's leadership in AMS militaries matters

Gender mainstreaming has been the primary strategy for implementing the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) since 2013. UN Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted on 31 October 2000, underscores the importance of women's equal participation, leadership and involvement in maintaining and promoting peace and security, including the integration of gender perspectives in peace and security institutions.

Gender equality is essential for sustainable development, which in turn relies on peace and security. Within ASEAN, the Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security (RPA WPS) affirms that "sustainable peace can only be achieved through inclusion."¹ Empirical research has demonstrated that the participation of women in peace negotiations leads to more peace agreements with political reform provisions and higher rates of implementation.² The international community is increasingly recognising the importance of women with the defence sector and militaries in improving operational effectiveness because gender-diverse teams lead to better decision-making for complex scenarios.³

The goal is to ensure that women have equal opportunities, access to resources, and responsibilities that align with their competencies and roles. Output 2.4 of the RPA WPS envisions women participating meaningfully in security sector institutions of the AMS, such as the armed forces and police, with increased representation in leadership roles and among UN peacekeepers, where women currently comprise only 7% of military personnel.⁴

Leadership provides women with decision-making opportunities to influence policy and operational conduct. This aligns with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which calls for "women's equal access to and full participation in decision-making bodies and mechanisms involved in the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of goals and targets."⁵ Understanding women's leadership in Southeast Asia is critical, given the significant role militaries play in security but also political, economic and social contexts.

¹ "ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security." Association of Southeast Asian Nations, November 16, 2022. <https://asean.org/asean-regional-plan-of-action-on-women-peace-and-security/>, p. i.

² Adjei, Maxwell. "Women's Participation in Peace Processes: A Review of Literature." *Journal of Peace Education* 16, no. 2 (May 4, 2019): 133–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400201.2019.1576515>; Krause, Jana, Krause, Werner, and Piia and Bränfors. "Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace." *International Interactions* 44, no. 6 (November 2, 2018): 985–1016. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2018.1492386>.

³ Nations, United. *Towards Equal Opportunity for Women in the Defence Sector*. New York: United Nations, 2024, p. 16; Bowers, Clint A., James A. Pharmer, and Eduardo Salas. "When Member Homogeneity Is Needed in Work Teams: A Meta-Analysis." *Small Group Research* 31, no. 3 (June 1, 2000): 305–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104649640003100303>.

⁴ "ASEAN RPA on WPS", p. 25; Carlsson, Karin. "5 Steps to Reach the 2028 Targets for Gender Parity in Peacekeeping." DCAF - Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, March 12, 2024. <https://www.dcaf.ch/5-steps-reach-2028-targets-gender-parity-peacekeeping>.

⁵ Paragraph F, ASEAN Declaration on the Gender-Responsive Implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and Sustainable Development Goals, p. 3

Methodology

This study investigates why so few women hold senior leadership positions in ASEAN militaries. To provide a representative cross-section of Southeast Asia, five AMS—Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand—were selected as case studies. These countries offer diversity across continental and maritime Southeast Asia, large and smaller populations, political systems, and religious and socio-cultural contexts. The experiences of other AMS were included in the analysis where relevant. Analysis of Myanmar relied exclusively on secondary sources.

Given the varying levels of data available on the journey of women leaders in Southeast Asian militaries, this project adopts a qualitative approach. It integrates secondary sources with interviews with individuals who hold leadership positions to establish a baseline for comparing experiences across AMS. The focus of this report is leadership, particularly the opportunities afforded by promotion and progression through military ranks, with an emphasis on senior positions.

This study examines the intersection of identity, institutions, narratives, and power relationships to explore how leadership and gender dynamics are shaped within highly masculinised defence institutions. The gendering of roles and the deeply ingrained assumptions about identity and leadership are critical issues in this context. It is essential to acknowledge that the inclusion of women in the upper echelons of the military can challenge long-held cultural norms and behaviours within military organisations. Understanding these dynamics is pivotal for reimagining leadership and fostering greater gender equity in the armed forces.

Women in AMS Militaries: a snapshot

Several ASEAN Member States have introduced policies to enhance women's representation and address gender issues within their armed forces. According to their respective 2024 reports on implementing the Beijing Platform for Action, Cambodia established a Gender Mainstreaming Group, aimed at increasing the number of women in leadership and decision-making roles.⁶ Malaysia adopted gender-neutral recruitment and promotion policies across both the civil service and the armed forces.⁷ Despite the importance of gender equality in security sectors, only three ASEAN member states have implemented National Action Plans (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security.⁸ This lack of comprehensive policy frameworks significantly impedes the representation and advancement of women in the armed forces across the region. Even the Philippines, which has admitted women to its academy and to be trained in combat roles from 1993, still struggles to achieve gender parity in its armed forces. While 7 out of the top 10 graduates from the Philippine Military Academy in 2024 were women, they comprise only 8% of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).⁹ Nevertheless, even without NAPs, it is encouraging that all ASEAN Member States have committed to advancing the WPS agenda as a regional priority agenda, and to its implementation through concerted multi-sectoral efforts and partnerships.

⁶ Ministry of Women's Affairs. "Cambodia's National Review for Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action." Phnom Penh: Royal Government of Cambodia, June 2024. <https://www.asiapacificgender.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Cambodia%27s%20National%20Review%20for%20Implementation%20of%20the%20Beijing%20Platform%20for%20Action%20%282024%29.pdf>, p. 49.

⁷ Ministry Of Women, Family And Community Development. "Malaysia's National Review for Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action." Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Government, 2024. <https://www.asiapacificgender.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/MALAYSIA%20National%20Review%20for%20Implementation%20of%20the%20Beijing%20Platform%20for%20Action%20%282024%29.pdf>, p. 16.

⁸ ASEAN member states with NAPs are the Philippines (2010), Indonesia (2014) and Viet Nam (2024) while Thailand is currently drafting its NAPs.

⁹ Agoot, Liza. "Female Cadets Thank PMA for Equal Opportunities to Serve Country." *Philippines News Agency*, May 13, 2024. <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1224595>.

Table 1 – Women serving in AMS militaries¹⁰

Country	% Women	Year
Indonesia	10% ¹¹	2020
Malaysia	13% (army) ¹²	2018
Myanmar	0.2% ¹³	2019
Philippines	6.5% ¹⁴	2020
Singapore	8% ¹⁵	2022
Thailand	17% ¹⁶	2025
Viet Nam	3.11% ¹⁷	2024

Relative to other militaries, the participation rates of women in Southeast Asian armed forces are like other Asian states but, in some instances, low relative to Western forces. Women represent 9% of personnel in Japan's Self-Defence Forces while they comprise roughly 4% in the world's most population country, India.¹⁸ Looking at Western militaries that have actively encouraged women's recruitment, Australia's female representation in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) stood at 20.4%.¹⁹ In comparison, New Zealand and the United States reported female participation rates of 20.3% and 17.5%, respectively.²⁰

Data on the proportion of women in senior military leadership positions remains scarce. While the current figures may be higher, in 2018, women comprised only 2.9% of senior ranks in the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces.²¹ In contrast, the Armed Forces of the Philippines, with more progressive gender policies, has achieved a significantly higher representation, with women making up 21% of leadership positions.²² While the Philippines success is to be lauded, even by global standards, it remains the exception amongst its Southeast Asian neighbours.

¹⁰ Limitations in data availability and time precluded the inclusion of all AMS, namely Brunei, Cambodia and Lao PDR, in this study. The selected case studies were chosen to provide a diverse and illustrative cross-section of the region, while acknowledging that the absence of comprehensive data from some countries may affect the generalisability of findings.

¹¹ Arbi, Ivany Atina. "Long Road to Gender Equality in Indonesian Military - National." *The Jakarta Post*, June 26, 2020. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/06/26/long-road-to-gender-equality-in-indonesian-military.html>.

¹² *Malaysiakini*. "Female Participation in Army Surpasses Target." October 20, 2018. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/448205>.

¹³ Byrd, Miemie Winn. "Integration of Women and Gender Perspective into the Myanmar Armed Forces to Improve Civil-Military Relations in Myanmar." *Military Review* November-December 2019. Accessed January 29, 2025. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/November-December-2019/Byrd-Myanmar-Gender-Armed-Forces/>.

¹⁴ Nepomuceno, Priam. "AFP Supports Women Empowerment Policies." *Philippines News Agency*, March 11, 2020. <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1096213>.

¹⁵ De Souza, Joshua. "She Walked So Others Could Run." *Pioneer*, March 8, 2024. <https://www.defencepioneer.sg/pioneer-articles/she-walked-so-others-could-run>.

¹⁶ Royal Thai Embassy, Canberra. This is a marked increase from 2023, the figure was reportedly 8%. Tangen, Theanne. "Royal Thai Army, U.S. Army Soldiers Participate in Historic All-Female Airborne Course." *Indo-Pacific Defense FORUM* (blog), September 19, 2023. <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2023/09/royal-thai-army-u-s-army-soldiers-participate-in-historic-all-female-airborne-course/>.

¹⁷ Ministry Of Women, Family And Community Development. "National Review Of The 30-Year Implementation Of The Beijing Declaration And Platform For Action In Viet Nam (2019-2023)." Ha Noi: The Socialist Republic Of Viet Nam, 2024. <https://www.asiapacificgender.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/Viet%20Nam%20National%20Review%20for%20Implementation%20of%20the%20Beijing%20Platform%20for%20Action%20%282024%29.pdf>.

¹⁸ Murakami, Sakura, and Tim Kelly. "Japan's Military Needs More Women. But It's Still Failing on Harassment." *Reuters*, May 19, 2024, sec. Japan. <https://www.reuters.com/world/japan/japans-military-needs-more-women-its-still-failing-harassment-2024-05-13/>; Shukla, Neeshu. "From World War to Agniveers; Here's the Complete Journey of Indian Women in Armed Forces." *Financial Express*, March 19, 2024. <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-from-world-war-to-agniveers-the-complete-journey-of-indian-women-in-armed-forces-3430662/>.

¹⁹ Department of Defence. "Women in the ADF 2022-23." Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2024. <https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-07/Women-in-ADF-Report-2022-2023.pdf>, pp. 1, 6.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 7.

²¹ Handley, Erin. "Few Women in Upper Ranks of Cambodia's Military." *The Phnom Penh Post*, March 6, 2018. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/few-women-upper-ranks-cambodias-military>.

²² Domanais, Gabriela Paulette. "A Review of the Promotion Process for Female Senior Officers in the Armed Forces of the Philippines." Executive Policy Brief. Manila: National Defense College of The Philippines, July 26, 2024. <https://155.137.78.71/a-review-of-the-promotion-process-for-female-senior-officers-in-the-armed-forces-of-the-philippines/>.

These figures reflect broader global trends of gender disparity in leadership roles, which are particularly pronounced in Indo-Pacific societies. For example, despite initiatives aimed at enhancing female representation, women globally occupy less than one-quarter (23.3%) of board seats, a figure that plummets to 14.8% in the Asia and the Pacific.²³ Interestingly, Malaysia leads Southeast Asia with a board representation rate of 28.5%, surpassing the more gender-progressive Philippines at 21.7%.²⁴ This achievement has been largely attributed to the implementation of enforced quotas. A similar trend is observed in ministerial positions, where the Philippines again takes the lead in the region with 26.3% of ministerial positions being held by women, while Myanmar lags significantly at just 3.8%.²⁵ However, when examining senior and middle management roles, Philippine women hold a notable 41.3%, even as Vietnamese women account for a commendable 21.8%.²⁶ Some scholarship has been devoted to women in the Southeast Asian militaries, yet a gap on women's pathway to leadership remains.²⁷ This report aims to explore whether unique factors inherent to military professions contribute to the disproportionately low representation of women overall and specifically in senior leadership roles within these armed forces.



A female soldier rehearses for the Indonesian Military's 74th anniversary ceremony at the Halim Perdanakusuma Air Force Base in East Jakarta on Oct. 3, 2019. Image Courtesy of **Donny Fernando, The Jakarta Post**.

²³ In an analysis of over 18,000 companies in 50 countries, this represents only a 3% increase since the last edition of the study was published in 2022. In the Asia-Pacific, the study analysed 5,832 companies.: Deloitte Global. "Women in the Boardroom: A Global Perspective, Eight Edition." Deloitte Insights, 2024. <https://www.deloitte.com/nz/en/services/risk-advisory/research/women-in-the-boardroom-2024.html>, pp. 4, 186.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 209.

²⁵ World Bank. "Proportion of Women in Ministerial Level Positions (%)." World Bank Gender Data Portal. Accessed January 27, 2025. <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/sg-gen-mnst-zs>.

²⁶ No data was available for Malaysia: International Labour Organization. "SDG Indicator 5.5.2 – Proportion of Women in Senior and Middle Management Positions." ILOSTAT Data Explorer. Accessed January 29, 2025. https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer40/?id=SDG_0552_NOC_RT_A&ref_area=IDN+MMR+PHL+VNM&timefrom=2010&latestyear=TRUE®ion=ROAP.

²⁷ Examples of existing scholarship include Walsh, Sean P. "The Roar of the Lion City: Ethnicity, Gender, and Culture in the Singapore Armed Forces." *Armed Forces and Society* 33, no. 2 (2007 2006): 265–85; Salebaran, Salebaran, and Mutiah Amini. "Women, Military, and State: Indonesian Women's Military Representation During the Early Independence Period." *International Journal of Military History and Historiography*, November 11, 2022; Azizah, Nur, Ali Maksum, and Muhammad Ammar Hidayatulloh. "Enhancing Women Contribution in Peace, Conflict Resolution, and Security Agenda: Indonesian Female Peacekeepers in the United Nations Peacekeeping Operation (Garuda Contingent – KONGA)." *Revista UNISC* 18, no. 53 (May 1, 2020): 111–29; Andaya, Barbara Watson. "Rethinking the Historical Place of 'Warrior Women' in Southeast Asia." In *Women Warriors in Southeast Asia*, edited by Vina Lanzona and Frederik Rettig, 267–93. Routledge, 2020; Beitler, Ruth Margolies, and Sarah M. Gerstein. "South and Southeast Asia." In *Women and the Military: Global Lives in Focus*, 186–207. Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2021.

Factors influencing women's leadership

Institutional and structural factors

Recruitment and restriction

Any examination of women's leadership in the military must begin with understanding recruitment and retention. For many women, an armed forces job represented service to the country, stable employment²⁸ and income, social mobility and even a challenge. While the military life is not attractive to all, it is clear many women are attracted to it, especially for the opportunities and scholarships it can provide.²⁹ However, to promote women to senior officer ranks, the armed forces must attract good candidates and, even after natural attrition, have a sufficient pool available for senior promotion.

Historically, Southeast Asian countries had closed their military academies to women. One of the major costs to such a policy is the inability for women to build ties with peers who will facilitate each other's promotions throughout their careers. The graduating class for a male cadet will form an important circle (sometimes referred to as a "batch") which constitutes career if not lifelong bonds. Officers who are commissioned by means other than the academy, such as after graduating from university or transferring from the reserves, perceive career disadvantages relative to their academy counterparts and perceive a lack of acceptance by their peers. These sentiments are exacerbated for women for whom the academy is not an option.

Recent decades have seen legislative and political changes further enabling the inclusion of women in the military with certain institutions opening their doors to women cadets. However, this change will take some decades to see significant change in senior officer demographics. The Philippines is a prime example of where policy change has improved women's representation. Women could join to be enlisted or other-ranks but, during the 1980s, only the "enlisted woman of the year" was eligible to advance to officer training, restricting the pool.³⁰ When the Philippines Armed Forces started accepting female applicants in 1993, it recruited 17 women, of which only 7 graduated.³¹ In 2023, of the 350 cadets selected to attend the Philippines Military Academy (PMA), there were 128 females and 222 males which, at a ratio of over 1:2, represented the highest female-to-male ratio since the admission of women in 1993.³² As of December 2024, 764 women have graduated from PMA with the 2024 class valedictorian being one of seven women among the top ten performing cadets.³³ With a cadre of women with sufficient experience and seniority to reach the ranks of general, one Filipina interviewee was optimistic that the armed forces would see a woman service chief or even commanding general in the next decade.³⁴

²⁸ Interview with Indonesian Colonel 1.

²⁹ Interview with Cambodian Colonel.

³⁰ Interview with Philippines Brigadier; women had to gain a number of awards before being considered as "enlisted woman of the year", and so they were often older than their male counterparts beginning officer training: Orilla, Mylene C. "Two Officers and Gentle(Wo)Men." Fame Leaders' Academy (blog), July 26, 2019. <https://fameleadersacademy.ph/2019/07/26/two-officers-and-gentlewomen/>.

³¹ Republic Act No. 7192 or the Women in Development and Nation Building Act passed in 1993, allowing women entry into the military academy. Agoot, Liza. "Female Cadets Thank PMA for Equal Opportunities to Serve Country." *Philippines News Agency*, May 13, 2024. <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1224595>.

³² Farolan, Ramon J. "PMA Gender Equality Reaches New Heights." *Philstar.Com*. Accessed January 13, 2025. <https://www.philstar.com/opinion/2023/03/05/2249320/pma-gender-equalityreaches-new-heights>.

³³ Cabreza, Vincent. "PMA: 764 Female Military Officers Owe Careers to Rasul." *INQUIRER.Net*, December 1, 2024. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/201139/pma-764-female-military-officers-owe-careers-to-rasul>; Agoot, "Female Cadets Thank PMA for Equal Opportunities to Serve Country."

³⁴ Interview with Philippines Brigadier.

Other countries have moved in a similar direction as the Philippines but with tentative changes. The Malaysian military academy saw its first 22 female cadets in 1980.³⁵ By 2012, the intake for women was 10 to 15% and the number of women cadets had grown to 116 out of 1,056 undergraduates.³⁶ However, the intake is now capped at 10% women across the armed forces. Malaysian respondents suggested that men did not want more women in the military.³⁷ Even if all women successfully progress in their careers, such a cap restricts the proportion of women who can advance to higher echelons, limiting it to a maximum of one in ten. Brigadier Yohanez Ahmad (rtd) was the first female Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) one-star, appointed only in August 2016.³⁸ In contrast, we are yet to see the impact of policy change in Southeast Asia's largest state, with the Indonesian military only opening its army academy to women in 2013 but then closing it again in 2024.³⁹ While women can become officers by other pathways, including after university study, women officers said it was a lack of faith in investing in women officers which led to the policy reversal.⁴⁰

In Thailand, women are denied admission to the Royal Thai Army academy, which can pose a significant barrier for career advancement of women officers. While the Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Thai Air Force Academy (NKRAFA) has admitted women, one Thai officer said she believed she was denied the position of director of her section because she did not graduate from that institution.⁴¹

Training and education

English language competence was another key to opening up development opportunities for women. To increase candidate competitiveness for peacekeeping operations or conferences, senior women encouraged their juniors to consolidate their language skills. Indonesian respondents said this was a major factor in their ability to travel overseas with the military, thereby deepening their professional experiences and networks.⁴² In addition to self-study, attending courses in countries like Australia was an important mechanism to develop English language competence and self-confidence. Of the 15 women interviewed, 11 women, from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, had undertaken higher education or professional education at an Australian university or as part of an Australian Department of Defence-sponsored course.⁴³ Interviewees emphasised the importance of engaging in training and education with militaries that have women in senior leadership. Such interactions not only expose both male and female personnel to the normalisation of women in leadership roles but also provide valuable insights into effective strategies for integrating women into leadership positions.

Combat and operational experience

Restricted access to other certain military experiences also negatively impacts the prospects of women's promotion. Long-held to be the exclusive domain of "brothers-in-arms", many reasons have been offered to prevent women from joining combat corps such as infantry, artillery and cavalry, or in roles likely to involve combat. In the past, Western militaries had not only excluded women in combat, particularly during the 20th century, but actively sought to erase

³⁵ <https://toharudinrasid.blogspot.com/2009/10/military-life-pt-1-cadet-school.html>

³⁶ Juhary, Jowati. "FROM A MILITARY ACADEMY TO A DEFENCE UNIVERSITY: THE NEEDED TRANSFORMATION." *European Scientific Journal*, ESJ8, no. 8 (April 19, 2012). <https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2012.v8n8p%pp.7-8>.

³⁷ Interviews with Malaysian Brigadiers and Lieutenant Colonel.

³⁸ <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/02/569689/suriakala-malaysias-first-non-malay-female-major-general>

³⁹ The army and air force academies did not recruit female cadets in 2024: discussion with Indonesian military colleagues based in Canberra.

⁴⁰ Interview with Indonesian Colonel and Indonesian Lieutenant Colonel 2; see also Caesaria, Sandra Desi, and Mahar Prastiwi. "35 Jurusan D4-S1 Khusus Perempuan yang Banyak Dibutuhkan TNI 2024." ["35 Specialised Women's Degree Majors that TNI Needs in 2024"] *KOMPAS.com*, September 24, 2024. <https://www.kompas.com/edu/read/2024/09/24/130954171/35-jurusan-d4-s1-khusus-perempuan-yang-banyak-dibutuhkan-tni-2024>.

⁴¹ Interview with Thailand air vice marshal.

⁴² Interview with Indonesian colonel and lieutenant colonel 2.

⁴³ Indonesian colonel, Philippines brigadier (rtd), Philippines colonel, Thai air vice marshal,

their historical contributions.⁴⁴ Similarly, in Southeast Asian militaries, it appears that the historical role of women combatants have been marginalised or forgotten.⁴⁵ In order to reach the rank of colonel or above in the Malaysian and Thai militaries, among others, membership of a combat corps was essential.

In some countries, attitudes towards women in combat impacted women's lives in the military due to gendered perceptions of needing to keep women out of danger.⁴⁶ In others, religion is a factor. In Muslim majority countries, it was seen as much harder for women to be deployed in remote areas due to religious restrictions about men and women cohabiting.⁴⁷

Other barriers for promotion included restrictions for women in certain categories of jobs. For instance, women interviewed said they believed, on top of being favoured for higher promotion, only a pilot could be the air force chief. In some militaries, the ability for women to rise to the top job might take decades, if at all. Thailand only opened recruitment for women pilots in 2016, beginning only with five trainees.⁴⁸ However, these pilots are only for strategic airlift and not in combat roles. According to the Thai officer, it seemed like the inclusion for women as pilots was "for PR", evidenced by a lack of career path planning for these personnel.⁴⁹ For these women to be promoted, they had to look for positions outside of their squadrons, as staff officers in headquarters, for example.

While women have been restricted in certain combat positions, the inclusion of women in peacekeeping operations has provided them with the necessary experience to apply theoretical knowledge and demonstrate the field skills for promotion. A Cambodian colonel said it was also an opportunity for women who wanted to challenge male perceptions of women and for women to push themselves out of their comfort zone.⁵⁰

The need to engage with women and children in the local population during peacekeeping operations also encouraged a prominent and meaningful role for women in uniform. Like other developing states, certain Southeast Asian countries have developed strategies to increase not just their presence in UN-mandated peacekeeping forces but to boost the proportion of women serving among their ranks. For its part, Indonesia has used its voice in international forums to support this initiative. During its presidency of the UN Security Council in 2020, the body adopted Resolution 2538, the first dedicated to women in peacekeeping, calling for member states to strengthen efforts to support women's effective and meaningful participation in UN PKO and encouraging them to increase greater numbers.

In terms of troop contributions, chief among AMS have been Indonesia and Cambodia. Indonesia traditionally deploys large contingents of peacekeepers, including a current deployment of 136 women from 2,496 troops, representing 5.4% of the contingent.⁵¹ Cambodia currently has 585 troops across multiple operations, including 123 women who represent 21% of the deployed force.⁵² Phnom Penh is set to continue this trend with a stated aim in 2024 of sending 20% more women as part of its WPS commitments.⁵³ Other AMS with aspirations to increase the number of women deployed include Malaysia, with currently 10.5% female personnel on operations in Lebanon, and Thailand with 10.2% female personnel in South Sudan.⁵⁴

⁴⁴ Percy, Sarah. *Forgotten Warriors: A History of Women on the Front Line*. London: John Murray, 2023.

⁴⁵ Many women assumed active combat roles during insurgencies, notably in Indonesia and Viet Nam, but were excluded from joining the armed forces drawn from insurgent fighters: see Andaya, Barbara Watson. "Rethinking the Historical Place of 'Warrior Women' in Southeast Asia." In *Women Warriors in Southeast Asia*, edited by Vina Lanzona and Frederik Rettig, 267–93. Routledge, 2020.

⁴⁶ Interview with Cambodian colonel.

⁴⁷ Discussion with Brunei High Commission, Canberra.

⁴⁸ Piyanantisak & Yupas, *Women in Organizations: Case of Thailand's Military Institutions*, pp. 455–456.

⁴⁹ Interview with Thai air vice marshal.

⁵⁰ Interview with Cambodian colonel.

⁵¹ The Elsie Initiative Fund. "DPO Gender Parity Data," March 2025. <https://elsiefund.org/dpo-gender-parity-data/>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ry, Sochan. "RCAF Report Promotes Increased Female Peacekeepers." *The Phnom Penh Post*, July 31, 2024. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/rcaf-report-promotes-increased-female-peacekeepers>.

⁵⁴ Nizar, Mohamad Harith Mohamad. "M'sia Receives Top Award For Female Peacekeepers' Participation In UN Missions." *BERNAMA*, May 15, 2025, https://www.bernama.com/en/news.php/crime_courts/politics/news.php?id=2423070; Sae-han, Warissara. "Thai Women's Role International Peacekeepers." *Thai PBS World*, June 2, 2025. <https://world.thaipbs.or.th/detail/thai-womens-role-international-peacekeepers/57712>.

These deployments have also led to women successfully assuming leadership positions on operations. Cambodian officer Lieutenant Colonel Chea Maysaros was awarded Force Commander Commendation for her “courage and determination” while serving as a deputy commander of a demining, food and logistics unit in Lebanon, consisting of 180 men and 30 women.⁵⁵ In 2024, compatriot Lieutenant Colonel Sorm Leangy became her country’s first woman commander of a unit serving in Lebanon.⁵⁶ These experiences not only serve as powerful examples that inspire more women from ASEAN militaries to volunteer for peacekeeping operations, but also demonstrate to national military hierarchies their ability to lead multinational teams in complex environments.

Challenges in securing participation persist. While not formally required in certain AMS, some women still felt they must secure permission from family members, whether their husband or parents, to go on such operations.⁵⁷ It was reported that Indonesian military officers still required formal permission from their husbands to serve on PKO.⁵⁸

Affirmative action

Some AMS have introduced policies to increase their number of women in leadership in their militaries. In 1993, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) introduced the SAF Merit Scholarship (Women), a groundbreaking initiative aimed at recruiting exceptional female students for leadership roles in the military. This program, launched around the same time the Philippines opened its military academy to women, offered recipients fully-funded overseas undergraduate education followed by comprehensive officer training. The scholarship was designed to groom these talented women for senior leadership positions within the SAF, marking a significant step towards gender diversity in Singapore’s military hierarchy. This initiative has since produced notable leaders, including Brigadier-General Gan Siow Huang, who in 2015 became the SAF’s first female general, demonstrating the program’s success in fostering female military leadership.⁵⁹ That said, women’s representation in senior ranks remains low, given women only represent 8% of the overall military workforce.

In contrast, Cambodia has a high number of women serving as generals, partly due to positive discrimination policies that mandate the appointment of a woman at the level of vice minister or secretary or as a deputy in all government departments.⁶⁰ Cambodia’s Secretary of State, General Dam Dariny, was promoted to a four-star rank, despite not having risen through traditional military promotion.⁶¹ Much like a quota system, these appointments can encourage the visibility of women and provide opportunities that might have been otherwise denied. In addition to positive behaviour modelling, mentoring, particularly through a mentorship program, was seen as important.⁶² One Thai officer had had women role models as teachers, and had served as a role model in encouraging others to respect women officers.⁶³ To mitigate the isolation some women in the Royal Brunei Armed Forces felt, one Brunei Colonel requested that women officers be posted to her office so that, in absence of a formal system, she could mentor them.⁶⁴

⁵⁵ Nang, Veasna, and Sunly Chhun. “Cambodian Woman Peacekeeper Awarded with UN Medal - Khmer Times,” March 15, 2022. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501042064/cambodian-woman-peacekeeper-awarded-with-un-medal/>.

⁵⁶ UN Women – Asia-Pacific. “Lieutenant Colonel Sorm Leangy, a Force for Peace,” May 29, 2025. <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/stories/feature-story/2025/05/lieutenant-colonel-sorm-leangy>.

⁵⁷ Interview with Cambodian colonel.

⁵⁸ Interview with Indonesian colonel.

⁵⁹ Tan, Lynette. “Sense of Purpose Drives SAF’s First Woman General.” *TODAY*, June 26, 2015. <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/first-woman-be-made-brigadier-general-saf>.

⁶⁰ Interview with Cambodian lieutenant general (man), interview with Cambodian colonel.

⁶¹ Torn, Vibol. “King Promotes Two Female Officers.” *Khmer Times*, April 13, 2023. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501273036/king-promotes-two-female-officers/>.

⁶² Questionnaire response from Cambodian major general.

⁶³ Interview with Thai air vice marshal.

⁶⁴ Interview with Brunei colonel.

Cultural expectations and gender norms

Gendered assumptions about role and behaviour also influence the promotion of military women. Women still had to overcome behavioural assumptions that men were natural leaders. In a published interview, Lieutenant Colonel Raquel Vilchez shared her experience:

I had to prove to them (the troops) that I can lead them and that I will not leave them hanging. One of the challenges I had was how to discipline them. I had to be firm but mindful of their field experiences. I had to be tough without challenging their manhood. I had to show them who's in-charge and I know what I'm doing.⁶⁵

Others saw this as stemming from cultural considerations. The Indonesian Colonel said educating citizens about gender equity was important to overcome cultural barriers:

Indonesia has an Eastern culture where women cannot be the leader, even outside the military. We know that we had [female] ministers, even a [woman] president. And mostly, in my opinion, because people or Indonesian people, do not support us fully, so only those who learn a lot about this equal responsibility between men and women, they can support us. But the ones whose thinking is still based on their Islamic tradition and culture and knowledge [cannot].⁶⁶

Officers interviewed revealed that, contrary to claims of meritocracy, deeply ingrained cultural barriers significantly hindered women's career advancement. Despite frequently outperforming their male counterparts, female officers were routinely overlooked for promotions. This discrimination was viewed as stemming primarily from gender bias and the persistent notion that the military remains a "man's world."⁶⁷ The disparity between performance and recognition underscores the systemic challenges women face in breaking through the brass ceiling in armed forces. A Brunei officer described the pervasive sexism as "demoralising", stating that women who were not sufficiently resilient in this environment often felt compelled to leave.⁶⁸ While natural attrition accounts for some women leaving the military—whether to pursue international career opportunities or explore professional paths outside the armed forces—interviewees overwhelmingly cited entrenched gender biases as the primary barrier to women's advancement into senior leadership roles. These pervasive negative gender norms, rather than individual choices or merit, were consistently identified as the fundamental obstacle preventing women from ascending to top positions within the military hierarchy.

Other ideas about masculinity related to building ties. For some women, it was difficult to build a supportive network without engaging in "masculine" activities. Golf was regarded as an integral part of ASEAN culture, with the sport often serving as an informal setting for networking and deal-making. As a result, key decisions and opportunities were frequently shaped on the green rather than in formal meetings. Some women picked up the sport not because they liked it but to be included.⁶⁹ Much like the restriction to a graduating batch, this inability to break into a "boys' club" impacted their ability to be seen.⁷⁰ As the Cambodian Colonel shared, "women have to stay home, not make noise, raise children and take care of the husband."⁷¹

⁶⁵ Orilla, "Two Officers and Gentle(Wo)Men."

⁶⁶ Interview with Indonesian colonel.

⁶⁷ Interview with Brunei colonel, Indonesian colonel, Malaysian lieutenant colonel, and Thai air vice marshal.

⁶⁸ Interview with Brunei colonel.

⁶⁹ Interview with Malaysian brigadier 1 and Malaysian lieutenant colonel.

⁷⁰ A senior defence journalist in Southeast Asia also stated that the "boys club" mentality of the Malaysian Armed Forces was still a barrier for women.

⁷¹ Interview with Cambodian colonel.

Care responsibilities

The perception of the military as a “man’s world” reinforced the restrictive notion that women’s primary domain was, by default, the household. Thus, one of the most pervasive gendered assumptions hindering women’s career advancement in several ASEAN member states’ militaries is the expectation that they should prioritise caregiving responsibilities, especially for children, over their professional duties. For instance, in Indonesia, the Suharto-era national ideology known as “state ibu-ism”, which defines women as primarily wives and mothers, continues to be influential today.⁷² Statements by senior leaders in Cambodia and Vietnam reminding women military officers of their role in upholding traditional family values reinforce this gendered norm in other parts of Southeast Asia.⁷³

This societal expectation is not merely theoretical; it is consistently reflected in the lived experiences of female service members. Organisations with working parents will often experience lowered productivity, increased absenteeism, reduced job satisfaction and high employee turnover.⁷⁴ Lower productivity linked to having to divide attention and stress between one’s home and working life is supported by the interviews. A Cambodian Colonel noted that women were responsible for domestic work so if they served in the military, they (as opposed to the men) had to manage their time more effectively.⁷⁵ Flexible working hours as well as opportunities for remote work would enhance a more equitable military environment and discourage absenteeism.⁷⁶ For single mothers without adequate support systems, this challenge is even more acute. The care burden is more acute for women, which impacted their work, and some worried about leaving children home alone, which could be mitigated by childcare at the workplace.⁷⁷ This has been partially mitigated in the Thai military with the Thai Air Force opening a nursery in 2023 for staff children on base.⁷⁸

One alternative was to outsource care and domestic work responsibilities to family members, especially mothers and sisters, domestic workers and nannies. This allowed them to take on greater professional responsibilities and pursue opportunities that involved time away from children. One Malaysian officer took her children with her on work trips, a financial commitment which enabled her to pursue certain opportunities.⁷⁹ To ensure focus on her work, an Indonesian officer said she and her civilian husband committed to share the burden of child-rearing and were supported by her mother and domestic workers.⁸⁰ In certain AMS such as Thailand, paternity leave is offered to fathers, however it is unclear the extent to which this is taken up and the impact on cultural change towards gender-equitable care responsibilities.

In addition to care responsibilities for children, demographics might impact women’s leadership. Only a few interviewees mentioned caring for parents but it did not appear to impact their career. That said, as populations across Southeast Asia begin to age, if cultural assumptions about gendered roles are slow to change, then care responsibilities for parents and in-laws will fall to women. Under such circumstances, in addition to efforts to shift social norms about care, a combination of support from family members, aged care facilities, or domestic workers and nurses can help shift this responsibility.

⁷² Suryakusuma, Julia. “Is State Ibuism Still Relevant?” *Inside Indonesia* (blog), July 2, 2012. <https://www.insideindonesia.org/editions/edition-109-jul-sep-2012/is-state-ibuism-still-relevant>; Suryakusuma, Julia. *State Ibuism: The Social Construction of Womanhood in New Order Indonesia*. Depok, West Java, Indonesia: Komunitas Bambu, 2011.

⁷³ At an event leading up to International Women’s Day 2018, then Defence Minister Thea Banh stated “Female soldiers must continue to maintain the tradition and dignity of Cambodian women in order to improve the social morality, women’s value and the Khmer family forever”: Handley, Erin. “Few Women in Upper Ranks of Cambodia’s Military.” *The Phnom Penh Post*, March 6, 2018. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/few-women-upper-ranks-cambodias-military>; at the sixth Army Women’s Congress 2016, then Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong encouraged army women to “continue to fulfil their assigned work in parallel with taking care of their families. This was a doubly heavy responsibility but also a double honour”: *Nhan Dan Online*. “Party Chief Praises Contributions by Women in People’s Army.” December 8, 2016. <https://en.nhandan.vn/post-47613.html>.

⁷⁴ Prospera, IBCWE, and IW. “A Guide to Employer-Supported Childcare.” Jakarta, March 8, 2024. <https://investinginwomen.asia/knowledge/a-guide-to-employer-supported-childcare/>.

⁷⁵ Interview with Cambodian colonel.

⁷⁶ Questionnaire response from Cambodian major general; interview with Cambodian colonel.

⁷⁷ Interview with Cambodian colonel. Feelings around not doing enough for children, largely encouraged by gendered expectations, were not unique to women in the Cambodian army. See Grose, Jessica. “The ‘Gut Wrenching’ Sacrifice of Military Moms.” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2020, sec. Parenting. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/11/parenting/moms-military-deployment.html>.

⁷⁸ Interview with Thai air vice marshal.

⁷⁹ Interview with Malaysian major general (rtd).

⁸⁰ Interview with Indonesian lieutenant colonel 1.

Gendered roles in the armed forces

These broader cultural challenges also shape cultural assumptions within the armed forces about the capacity and competence of women in certain roles and thus their promotion prospects. Women were strongly represented in the education, medical, psychology and legal corps.⁸¹ In these areas of the military, women told that they experienced few or no barriers to reaching the rank of Colonel, relative to men counterparts.⁸² It did not appear that such roles were subject to the challenges of remote postings often associated with combat roles, negative gendered perceptions or lack of role experience. While the maximum rank attainable in such positions was as high as a two-star general, these pathways would not lead to the position of service chief or other influential and visible roles in headquarters or policymaking.

In some militaries, women were still widely perceived as being better suited for administrative roles, creating a “pink ghetto”, defined as jobs typically held by women and often with limited career advancement.⁸³ At the same time, some women themselves acknowledged that such positions—which involved minimal relocations and predictable work hours—offered greater stability for balancing family and caregiving responsibilities. This highlights the need to view the high concentration of women in administrative roles as a result of both institutional perception and individual choice. However, in certain fields, women were actively sought after for promotion, particularly in the medical, nursing, and education corps. In Thailand, for example, women had been promoted to two-star general positions as directors of hospitals, finance, and administrative divisions.⁸⁴

The challenge is when choice is dictated by perception. The issue of lifting combat exclusion, thereby removing any promotion barriers, was still complicated by negative perceptions of women. The Cambodian Colonel felt it was the male perspective that women cannot be leaders on the frontline because they have short tempers, weak and faint, or “annoying because of health issues”.⁸⁵ There were also expectations that women would serve as nurses, teachers or administrative staff in the Cambodian army.⁸⁶ The implication was that men (and possibly women) did not expect much of women in the armed forces. Thus, one of the enabling factors was the presence of women (as well as men allies) to overcome some prejudices. One Malaysian officer said that human resources policy changes made by a woman brigadier just before she retired allowed changes for others.⁸⁷ In other instances, the challenge to gender bias came from outside the armed forces. During the Suharto era, the wife of then Indonesian president, Siti Hartinah, asked then military commander Feisal Tanjung why there were no girls at the academy, which helped precipitate a review of policy.⁸⁸

⁸¹ Interview with Indonesian colonel.

⁸² Interview with Thailand colonel.

⁸³ Allen, Renee Nicole, Alicia Jackson, and DeShun Harris. “The Pink Ghetto Pipeline: Challenges and Opportunities for Women in Legal Education.” *University of Detroit Mercy Law Review* 96 (2019 2018): 525.

⁸⁴ Interview with Thai air vice marshal.

⁸⁵ Interview with Cambodian colonel.

⁸⁶ Interview with Cambodian colonel.

⁸⁷ Interview with Malaysian major.

⁸⁸ Interview with Indonesian colonel.

Gender-based violence and harassment

Gender-based violence can affect all military members though women tend to be disproportionately affected. One Philippines colonel felt women were concerned about reporting incidents of gender-based violence in fear of negatively impacting their career, especially when the perpetrator was their officer-in-command and responsible for performance reviews.⁸⁹ The presence of women allows other victims to come forward to report sexual harassment, particularly on missions where sexual and gender-based violence can be perpetrated not only by the local community but by fellow service members.⁹⁰ The absence of such support can lead to mental health issues like anxiety and depression or feelings of marginalisation and isolation.⁹¹ The experience of gender-based violence and harassment also negatively impacts job performance and confidence, discouraging some women from pursuing promotion opportunities.⁹² Malaysian senior officers said WhatsApp groups for women personnel provided an important space to share experiences and strategies to cope with such an environment.⁹³ One study has shown that a woman's confidence in mechanisms to prevent sexual violence in the Philippines is positively correlated with her job satisfaction and likelihood to remain in the Philippines navy.⁹⁴ Such issues of reporting and retention impact women moving up the hierarchy.



Colonel Gan Siow Huang is the first woman to be made Brigadier General in SAF. Image Courtesy of Chan Luo Er/CNA.

⁸⁹ Interview with Philippines colonel.

⁹⁰ United Nations Peacekeeping. "Women Police Reflect on Their Deployment to UN Peacekeeping Operations," April 11, 2024. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/women-police-reflect-their-deployment-to-un-peacekeeping-operations>.

⁹¹ Questionnaire response from Cambodian major general.

⁹² Questionnaire response from Cambodian major general.

⁹³ Interviews with major general (rtd) and brigadier (rtd) 1.

⁹⁴ Castillo, Michelle. "Empowerment, Satisfaction, Commitment, and Retention Intention Among Women in the Military: The Case of the Philippine Navy." *Philippine Journal of Public Administration* 63, no. 1 (January 2021): 26–48.

Summary of findings

Good practices

Good and emerging practices across ASEAN highlight the importance of lifting restrictions on opportunities for women in the armed forces—such as access to combat roles—which broadens the eligible pool for promotion and leadership, ensuring a more equitable selection process. National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), where developed, provide an important framework to articulate national aspirations and guide implementation strategies tailored to domestic contexts. Political leadership also plays a pivotal role; figures like former Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi have championed gender equality and women's rights, advancing the visibility and legitimacy of WPS initiatives. Several AMS have actively advocated for WPS agendas at the international level, including through the UN Security Council, reinforcing regional commitment to inclusive peace and security. Showcasing the success of women in UN peacekeeping operations—particularly in leadership roles within multinational teams—has further validated their contributions and encouraged wider support for gender-inclusive reform within military institutions.

Supportive personal networks—such as extended family and domestic workers—have helped some women manage dual demands of military careers and caregiving expectations, while formal mentorship programs have guided junior officers through institutional challenges. To address gender-based violence and harassment, clear accountability mechanisms and confidential reporting channels are essential to countering cultures of silence and preventing retaliation against complainants.

Institutional and cultural barriers remain some of the most significant and enduring obstacles to women's advancement in the military. While women's access to roles in the armed forces has expanded over recent decades, progress has been uneven across Southeast Asian states. In countries like Cambodia and the Philippines, which actively encourage women participation in leadership, the picture is bright. Graduating classes of women cadets are finally emerging in senior-rank positions, increasing the visibility and normalising women's leadership. Opening academy positions to women will increase their opportunities to rise through the ranks; however, retention rates will significantly affect the pool of officers eligible for higher promotions.

Despite these advancements, gendered perceptions of women as unsuitable for frontline or leadership roles continue to block access to positions that provide the confidence, experience, respect, and legitimacy required for senior ranks, particularly as service chiefs. In Muslim-majority countries, religious constraints prohibiting the cohabitation of men and women in remote areas further limit women's combat experience. In such contexts, policy reforms must be accompanied by cultural change, a process that is inherently slow. Consequently, peacekeeping operations offer women the best alternative to gain the critical experiences necessary for advancement.

Care responsibilities still provided a challenge for women in uniform, especially single mothers, but for those with strong support systems, they did not appear disadvantaged for promotion. That said, since most interviewees were at the rank of colonel and above, the study focused on success cases, rather than those whose care responsibilities hindered promotion or led them to leave a military career. Even among high-ranking women interviewed, several appeared to take on more responsibility for children. Mentoring support and access to women's groups provided support not just for family strategies but also to manage sexual harassment and report gender-based violence.





Recommendations

Many of the officers interviewed identified sexist attitudes as the primary barrier to meaningful participation and career advancement, particularly the complete lack of access for women to military academies in some states. To address this, the primary recommendation is to re-define military leadership as gender-neutral, challenging traditional biases and assumptions.

At the same time, current military leaders must actively demonstrate their confidence in women's ability to excel in military roles, fostering a culture that values competence over gender and ensuring that leadership pathways are equally accessible to all, and that barriers based on stereotypes be removed.⁹⁵

On a positive note, officers noted that women who received education and training, particularly in English-speaking militaries, gained valuable skills that opened doors to unique opportunities in areas such as peacekeeping.

The recommendations below are based on firsthand testimonies from officers, as well as existing research on strategies for advancing women's leadership across various sectors.

1 	Defining Gender-Neutral Leadership: Foster discussions on what gender-neutral leadership entails and the broader value of women in leadership, not just in the armed forces but across all sectors. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Leadership and Gender Norms Strategy: Develop a comprehensive strategy that integrates leadership development with efforts to shift gender norms within military institutions. b. Measuring Change: Establish and baseline data points and implement quantitative and qualitative assessments to track progress in shifting gender norms and increasing women's participation in leadership. c. Male Advocates for Gender Equality: Identify and engage male military leaders as gender equality advocates to drive institutional change.
2 	Women in Decision-Making Roles: Involve women in human resources, training, and education policymaking to embed gender sensitivity in military structures. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Women on Promotion Boards: Ensure women's representation on promotion boards to create a more inclusive and fair assessment process.
3 	Mandatory Gender Training: Require training on gender equality, sexism, and sexual harassment, alongside the development of clear disciplinary mechanisms for violations, led by Gender and Development (GAD) teams.
4 	Mentorship Programs: Establish mentoring systems to support women's career advancement and leadership development.

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⁹⁵ Fitriani. "Recruiting More Women: Broadening SAF's Inclusive Policy." Commentary. Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), July 31, 2013. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/2031-recruiting-more-women-broaden/>, p. 2.

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5 	<p>Cross-National Conversations: Facilitate global dialogue between armed forces on women's leadership, particularly through Communities of Practice in countries with higher proportions of women in senior ranks.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. ASEAN Regional Forum on WPS: Expand the remit of this workshop to deepen the conversation about the role of women's military leadership in peace and security. b. ASEAN Senior Women Officer Network: Establish a support network to strengthen cross-national ties between senior women leaders and facilitate exchange of information.
6 	<p>Family Support Policies: Develop employer-supported childcare and caregiving policies for other dependents to ease the burden on military personnel with family responsibilities.⁹⁶</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Gender-Equitable Care Policies: Promote paternity leave and encourage men's participation in caregiving to support gender-equitable career progression.
7 	<p>Training and Development: Expand English language and professional training opportunities in collaboration with ASEAN Dialogue Partners to enhance career development for women in the military.⁹⁷</p>
8 	<p>ASEAN Member States should increase their deployment of women peacekeepers, as this offers crucial field experience and leadership opportunities for women in the military.</p>

This study underscores that the pursuit of emancipatory possibilities for women, particularly within the military, is far from complete. Meaningful participation at all levels is essential not only to advance gender equity but also to transform the structures and cultures of militaries across AMS. As one Cambodian general observed, increasing the representation of women in leadership “could also break down long-standing gender barriers” because it is “important for military institutions to reflect the society they serve ... which is crucial for legitimacy and public trust.”⁹⁸ Future research could expand on this study's qualitative foundation by broadening the pool of interviewees and, with sufficient data, incorporating quantitative methods. Additionally, extending the scope to include women in police leadership and defence civilian roles could provide deeper insights into gender dynamics across security sector institutions.

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Dr. Natalie Sambhi. Image Courtesy of asiasociety.org.

⁹⁶ A detailed explanation of what this could look like is found here: Prospera, IBCWE, and IW, “A Guide to Employer-Supported Childcare.”
⁹⁷ For instance, parachute training with the US Army required 100 women from the Royal Thai Army, thereby providing skills and qualifications to a large number of women at a time: Tangen, “Royal Thai Army, U.S. Army Soldiers Participate in Historic All-Female Airborne Course.”

⁹⁸ Questionnaire response from Cambodian major general.

Annex 1: Methodology and interviews

This study defines “high ranking” based on the leadership and responsibility roles of personnel, as required by the prevailing rank structures of AMS. Generally speaking, a “high rank” refers to OF-7 of NATO’s standard rank scale, equivalent to a one-star position (such as Brigadier in the army), and above. That said, in the context of Southeast Asia, our understanding of “high rank” must necessarily be broader. For instance, the highest commissioned rank attainable in the Royal Brunei Armed Forces is a two-star rank, as the Chief of Defence Force. Therefore, a colonel in Brunei, considered a “mid-ranking” officer by NATO standards, is effectively only two ranks below the military’s most senior position. Key informants are thus selected not just by their rank but by their level of leadership responsibilities and influence.

Interviewees were officers within the existing network of the report author or introduced through Defence Attachés and other contacts. Interviews took place in person or via video or phone call between July 2024 and January 2025. Interview participants provided informed consent to participate. Participants were given the option to be identified or deidentified in the final report or any research outputs.⁹⁹ Officers will be given the opportunity to review any direct quotes before they are used in published research outputs.

Before an interview, the officer was informed about the nature of the study, their role and the likely questions asked and how their data will be used. This research refers directly to the RPA WPS Priority Action 2.4.5. “Assess current networks utilised by women in the security sector (police, military, defence, peacekeeping, etc.) and identify additional networks and mentoring opportunities that may be needed, and opportunities for promoting women’s leadership and participation in the security sector, further tapping into the expertise of these networks, and identifying ways men can further support female leadership and success in the security sector”. As such, questions related to the experiences of participants and those observed of other women in AMS armed forces.

This research project adapts the Measuring Opportunities for Women in Peace Operations (MOWIP) methodology developed by the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF), considered by gender practitioners as a good practice methodology for barrier assessments of the security sector.¹⁰⁰ While this approach relates to peace operations, the ten issue areas developed as part of the MOWIP methodology (eligible pool, deployment criteria, deployment selection, household constraints, peace operations infrastructure, peace operations experiences, career value, top-down leadership, gender roles, and social exclusion) were adapted and applied to the experiences of women in their leadership journeys. For instance, peace operations infrastructure could be adapted to evaluating the required infrastructure at headquarters to accommodate women personnel.

Questions posed to interviewees included background questions around service duration as well as reasons for joining and staying in a military career. Promotion related questions included the following, tailored to the relevant AMS institutions:

1. Are there many women above the rank of colonel in the Royal Thai Armed Forces?
2. What factors have influenced your career progression so far?
3. What specific factors make promotion easier or harder for women in the RTAF?
4. Are these challenges unique to women?

⁹⁹ Given that the identity of the participants is known to the author, the term “deidentified” is used as opposed to anonymous. A project involving anonymous survey participants, for example, would be a true anonymous study.

¹⁰⁰ The Elsie Initiative Fund. “DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance Measuring Opportunities for Women in Peace Operations (MOWIP) Methodology.” Accessed August 9, 2024. <https://elsiefund.org/measuring-opportunities-for-women-in-peace-operations-methodology/>.

Annex 2: Interviewees

Country	Alias	Service	Role / corps
Brunei	Colonel	Army	Legal
Cambodia	Colonel	Army	Education
	Major general	Army	
Indonesia	Colonel	Air Force	Training
	Lieutenant colonel 1	Air Force	Psychology
	Lieutenant colonel 2	Air Force	Psychology
Malaysia	Major general (rtd)	Army	Personnel
	Brigadier 1 (rtd)	Air Force	Transport pilot
	Brigadier 2 (rtd)	Air Force	Logistics
	Lieutenant Colonel	Army	Engineering
	Major	Army	Engineering
Philippines	Brigadier (rtd)	Army	Personnel
	Colonel	Air Force	Combat pilot
Thailand	Air vice marshal	Air Force	Education
	Colonel	Army	Nursing

Annex 3: Southeast Asian women's representation in leadership in other sectors

Women on board seats¹⁰¹

Country	Women on board seats	Policy
Malaysia	28.5%	Yes, quota
Philippines	21.7%	N/A
Singapore	20.8%	N/A
Thailand	19%	N/A
Indonesia	9.7%	N/A

Women in senior and middle management¹⁰²

Economy	Year	Female share of employment in senior and middle management (%)
Philippines	2022	41.3%
Myanmar	2020	41%
Singapore	2022	40.6%
Thailand	2023	34.7%
Brunei Darussalam	2022	32.5%
Lao PDR	2022	25.7%
Cambodia	2021	24.6%
Vietnam	2022	17.1%
Indonesia	2023	N/A
Malaysia	2023	N/A

¹⁰¹ Data was available for only Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand: Deloitte Global, "Women in the Boardroom.", pp. 202, 209–210, 214, 218, 230.

¹⁰² World Bank. "Employment in Senior and Middle Management, Female (%)." World Bank Gender Data Portal. Accessed January 29, 2025. <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/si-emp-smgt-fe-zs>.

Women in ministerial-level positions in Southeast Asia¹⁰³

Economy	Year	Proportion of Women in Ministerial Level Positions (%)
Philippines	2022	26.3%
Indonesia	2022	20.7%
Lao PDR	2022	17.6%
Malaysia	2022	16.7%
Singapore	2022	13.3%
Brunei Darussalam	2022	11.1%
Cambodia	2022	11.1%
Vietnam	2022	11.1%
Thailand	2022	5.3%
Myanmar	2019	3.8%

SDG Indicator 5.5.2 – Proportion of women in senior and middle management positions¹⁰⁴

Country	Source	Year	%
Philippines	LFS - Labour Force Survey	2022	41.323
Myanmar	LFS - Labour Force Survey	2020	40.969
Singapore	LFS - Labour Force Survey	2023	39.807
Brunei Darussalam	LFS - Labour Force Survey	2023	38.99
Thailand	LFS - Labour Force Survey	2023	34.694
Lao People's Democratic Republic	LFS - Labour Force Survey	2022	25.681
Indonesia	LFS - National Labour Force Survey	2023	24.823
Cambodia	HIES - Household Socio-Economic Survey	2021	24.619
Viet Nam	LFS - Labour Force Survey	2023	21.826

¹⁰³ World Bank. "Proportion of Women in Ministerial Level Positions (%)." World Bank Gender Data Portal. Accessed January 27, 2025. <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/sg-gen-mnst-zs>.

¹⁰⁴ No data was available for Malaysia: International Labour Organization. "SDG Indicator 5.5.2 – Proportion of Women in Senior and Middle Management Positions." ILOSTAT Data Explorer. Accessed January 29, 2025. https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer40/?id=SDG_0552_NOC_RT_A&ref_area=IDN+MMR+PHL+VNM&timefrom=2010&latestyear=TRUE®ion=ROAP.

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