

# BREAKING BARRIERS AND BUILDING PATHWAYS FOR WOMEN IN ASEAN MILITARY LEADERSHIP

## 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 of 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.

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