The ambiguity of gender equality in the contemporary ACW Work Plan

Discourse analysis on how gender equality is framed in the ASEAN Committee on Women Work Plan 2021-2025

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Abstract

The study examines how gender equality is represented and problematized in the ASEAN Committee on Women Work Plan 2021-2025. The study seeks to explore discourse of gender equality present in the work plan, by employing Carol Bacchi's "What is the problem represented to be" method. The findings are analyzed through a postcolonial feminist approach to underpin some silences and subject positions, created by the problem representations current in the text. The findings implied that gender equality mostly is a "female issue", in which "women", are perceived as both the victims and the agents of change. Furthermore, women are generally defined as one coherent group and factors that differentiate their needs are partly neglected and overlooked. Despite that gender equality is framed as a fundamental value in the action plan, some formulations imply that gender equality is used as a means to achieve other goals of economic nature. Lastly, the recurrent framings of gender (in)equality attributed to male-biased social norms, might risk reinforcing certain gender stereotypes, which eventually could contribute to the policy resulting in being counterproductive in decreasing gender gaps in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: ASEAN, Gender equality, Discourse Analysis, WPR method, postcolonial feminism, ASEAN Committee on Women Work Plan 2021-2025

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Abbreviations

ACMW	ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers
ACWC	ASEAN Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children's Rights
ACW WP	ASEAN Committee on Women Work Plan 2021-2025
AICHR	ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
EU	European Union
GAD	Gender and Development
UN	United Nations
WID	Women in Development
WPR	What is the problem represented to be

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1. Introduction

Gender equality is a complex issue partly defined by the context in which it is used. A strand of scholars has contributed to the conceptualization of gender equality which has given rise to a series of initiatives aiming towards decreasing gender segregation (Razavi & Miller, 1995:2-4). In Southeast Asia, the geopolitical and economic organization, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have been one of the main actors in the process for increased commitments to gender equality. In the process, they have established themselves in the global arena by working together with member nations as well as intergovernmental institutions such as the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN) (Alami, 2018:196-197). They have adopted numerous policies targeting gender equality which has led to considerable change in large parts of the region. These improvements are for instance related to domestic violence, access to education, improved healthcare, and gender-based wage gaps (Carroll, 2020:37; Booth, 2016:174; UNESCO, 2022). However, there are plenty of challenges in the process towards an equal society. One of those challenges is the institutionalization of gender mainstreaming, aiming at incorporating gender aspects into public policy (Alami, 2018:198). Issues related to gender equality must in other words be incorporated into policy, to decrease gender segregation. But not only must the "gender aspects" be acknowledged, they must be put forward in a way that enables policies to have an impact.

I find the topic of discourse policy analysis especially interesting as studies of how an issue or concept is presented, often reveal the policymakers' presuppositions and intentions. Drawing on the assumption that language can be used as a meaning system, the study therefore seeks to analyze how gender equality is framed in one of ASEAN's policies, through Bacchi's approach, "What is the problem represented to be" (WPR).

1.1. Purpose and specific aims

As a concept, gender equality is multi-dimensional and is therefore commonly used in a wide range of disciplines (Shukla & Singh, 2022:223). Measurements of gender equality range from economic factors such as procuring sufficient labor and wages, to healthcare and educational statistics (Nair, 2021:30). Drawing on the post-structural assumption that concepts such as gender equality represent a framework filled with ambiguities, it can be argued that the framing of a concept in a certain initiative directly affects the policy´s outcome. Therefore, the study

seeks to problematize the underlying notions of how gender equality is presented in the ASEAN Committee on Women Work Plan 2021-2025 (ACW WP), to understand the concept's complexity. The analysis will be conducted through Bacchi´s WPR approach with the objective to shed light on the existing problem representation of gender equality, uncover underlying notions of the concept, what is left unproblematic in the ACW WP, and the effects of the problem representations (Grip, 2016:95-96).

The research questions the study seeks to answer is as follows:

How is gender equality represented in the ASEAN Committee on Women Work Plan 2021-2025, and what policy implications are produced by this framing of the concept?

1.2. Knowledge gap and relevance

During the last decades, increased efforts have been made to include gender mainstreaming in ASEAN policies. But despite the rapid increase in economic growth and human rights, studies on gender mainstreaming in ASEAN, remain relatively limited. In addition, research on gender equality in institutions mainly focuses on the United Nations, European Union, and the World Bank (Alami, 2018:187). Furthermore, in the existing research, most studies concentrate on the implementation and adoption process. The focus is thus relatively result-oriented, and less research has been done on what type of gender equality is put forward and advocated for (Grip, 2016:95). An example of distinctive interpretations of gender equality is the debates regarding difference and sameness. Some scholars argue that all people should be treated the same regardless of gender, while others raise the question of whether women should strive for success in other domains than men since women and men are "inherently different" (Nentwich, 2006:499-500). These types of uncertainties have led scholars such as Alami (2018:202-203), to argue that concepts, such as "gender" needs to be clarified in ASEAN policies for them to efficiently deal with gender-related issues. To fill the gap in how gender equality is conceptualized and defined in ASEAN policies, a discourse analysis will be applied to the ACW WP.

1.3. Scope limitations

The study is conducted through a discourse analysis in which the primary data usually consists of texts. In this case, the "text" is constituted by a policy document, which delimits the study to the prevailing discourse of the policymaking stage of ASEAN (Philips & Hardy, 2002:3-4). The WPR approach further delimits the study as the framing of the research questions narrows

down the scope even more. Since the aim is to explore how gender equality is represented, rather than how certain representations have emerged, two of the WPR question have been excluded from the study. As a result, the study focuses on the problem representation itself, rather than the contributing factors that have led to this framing of the concept. Lastly, the study is conducted through the lens of postcolonial feminist theory and the analysis is thus influenced by conceptual framings from postcolonial feminist literature. The study should thus be seen as a contribution to critical postcolonial feminist research, rather than an objective truth.

1.4. Outline

The paper will start by giving an overview of gender equality in Southeast Asia and how research on the topic has evolved over the last decades. The thesis goes on to illustrate ASEAN's role in the development process and how they work to decrease inequality. This section further includes an introduction of the policy that later will be analyzed. In the next section, the theoretical foundation is explained and elements of WPR and Postcolonial Feminism will be elaborated on. Thereafter, the research design will be outlined, and ethical aspects and limitations will be discussed. In the methodology section, the WPR approach is explained more in-depth and the research questions guiding the analysis are presented. In the analysis, the finding is discussed and analyzed from a postcolonial angle before the conclusion and avenues for further research is presented.

2. Background

2.1. Previous research on gender equality in policy

Women in development (WID) draws on the notion that gender inequality is current in all development processes and the agenda aims at breaking down gender stereotypes by introducing equal and more efficient programs and legislation (Mohanty, 2003:23). Danish economist Ester Boserup had a huge impact on the approach with her book "Women's Role in Economic Development" in which she used gender as a variable to demonstrate how gender inequality often is overlooked in development processes. Boserup argued (in Razavi & Miller, 1995:2-3) that women should be entitled to a greater proportion of development resources as it will incentivize them to participate in the labor market which thus would strengthen their status in society (Razavi & Miller, 1995:3-4).

In the 1980s, a growing number of scholars started to make the distinction between gender as a social construct and biological sex. The shift led to an increased focus on cultural and social aspects related to gender relations and GAD, also known as the gender and development approach, emerged (Razavi & Miller, 1995:12-13). The approaches share some similarities but differ in the degree to which they include relations, norms, and values in the analysis. Unlike the WID approach, GAD analyzes inequality through a class perspective in which the main focus is on social norms that influence how gender stereotypes are framed (Razavi & Miller, 1995:13-14). Both WID and GAD have had an impact on how gender relations are perceived, both giving rise to new research, such as the WPR approach, as well as institutional machinery currently active in governments and international development agencies (Razavi & Miller, 1995:9).

Other, more emerging concepts of gender equality are among others "Lean-in", "HeforShe" and "Womenomics" (Shukla & Singh, 2022:224-227). In this context, the lean-in approach argues that women need to "Lean in" and make themselves heard to break down social barriers contributing to gender segregation. In other words, the more female opinions that are raised, the greater the likelihood that female participation in decision-making will increase (Shukla & Singh, 2022:224). The HeforShe approach focuses more on mens' and boys' roles in the equality paradigm (Shukla & Singh, 2022:226), while womenomics emphasizes how economic structures such as high levels of female unpaid work contribute to inequality (Shukla & Singh, 2022:227).

2.2. Gender equality and development in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia has been characterized by economic growth in recent decades which to some extent has led to decreased levels of poverty and inequality (Carroll, 2020:37; Yeung, 2020:24). The growth of labor-intensive industries has paved the way for female labor and incentivized women to join the workforce. However, due to what scholars such as Elias (2020:230) and Carroll (2020:72) describe as a class-based conflict, gender mainstreaming has been partly overlooked in most states' policy implementation processes. As a result, female labor is generally centered around export-oriented manufacturing and is often underpaid (Elias, 2020:231). Furthermore, large parts of Southeast Asia's economy are driven by labor-intensive production where wages have been cut to compensate for other expenses and to maintain low production costs (Carroll, 2020:72), which further contributes to gender segregation (Carroll, 2020:36-37).

Gender inequality is reflected in other ways than wages and is especially apparent in childhood education rates (Visaria, 2012:42). Class and gender divisions in access to education are present in most parts of Southeast Asia but have decreased over time (Yeung, 2020:13; Booth, 2016:174). However, since girls are more likely to be perceived as less of an economic asset, many families have found it more economically viable to invest in education for their sons rather than their daughters (Jayaweera, 1987:463). Women, therefore, tend to be clustered in domestic care work which makes them dependent on their partners and family members (Shittu & Abdullaj, 2018:79). Nonetheless, unpaid care work is also common among women with an education. In the lack of efficient paid parental leave policies, mothers often cannot return to work after childbirth which makes them perceived as short-term employees in comparison to their male colleagues (Yeung & Nanxun, 2022:18). The general notion that childbirth hamper women's ability to get back to work (Hwang et al, 2018:187) further results in consequences for women who choose not to have children, as they will not be seen as long-term employees either (Hsiao, 2022:6).

The isolation many women are exposed to in the domestic sphere is to some extent related to the high levels of gender-based violence that both occur on an institutional and on an individual level. Violence against women is a type of oppression that reinforces female subordination rooted in the patriarchal society (Norsworthy, 2003:145-146) and according to UNESCO (2022), 40% of all women in Southeast Asia had by 2021 experienced some type of domestic

violence. Moreover, gender-based abuse and exploitation are a primary health concern and presents a great threat to the achievement of gender equality (Norsworthy, 2003:145-146).

2.3. ASEAN & gender equality

ASEAN was established in 1967 and has experienced positive development in a range of sectors. Economically, ASEAN member countries did for example have an annual average of 5.1% higher economic growth in comparison to the rest of the global economy since 2007 (Alami, 2018:194-195). The regional assessment of the millennium development goals estimated a significant improvement in ASEAN member states both economically, but also in regards to decreased gender gaps (ASEAN, 2022:2; Carroll, 2020:37). ASEAN's work towards gender equality emerged in connection with the "ASEAN Women Leaders Conference" in 1975. Thereafter, ASEAN has adopted several policies addressing gender issues through close cooperation with civil society organizations. The majority of all initiatives have been embodied in the "ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights" (AICHR), the "ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers" (ACMW), and the "ASEAN Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children's Rights" (ACWC) (Alami, 2018:196). The efforts range from new programs to increase capacity building to the development of analytical tools for monitoring and evaluation of diverse programs. In practice, gender mainstreaming consists of three stages surrounding adoption of gender mainstreaming in organizations, institutions, and policies (Alami, 2018:186). The focus is thus on infusing gender considerations into organizational processes. The overall framework approach of ASEAN policies aiming for gender equality consists of conceptual elements including among others, eliminating violence against women and integrating a gender perspective in programs outside of the gender sphere (Alami, 2018:196-197; ASEAN, 2022:1).

Despite considerable progress, ASEAN has been posed with several challenges in the institutionalization of gender mainstreaming due to a lack of resources in the bodies in charge of gender equality. In addition, ACWC, responsible for the protection of women's and children's rights, has been questioned by several scholars for its independence and disconnection from other intergovernmental bodies (Alami, 2018:198). Furthermore, critics have pointed out that efforts made by ASEAN mostly focus on socio-cultural factors, rather than economic and political aspects. Lack of recognition of this was acknowledged in a progress report from 2015

on gender equality in ASEAN, where increased economic and political contributions for equality were highlighted as crucial (Alami, 2018:198).

2.3.1. ASEAN Committee on Women Work Plan 2021-2025

The ACW WP was declared in response to the ASEAN community vision 2025 to reinforce ASEAN's commitment to achieve gender equality (ASEAN, 2022:1). The work plan was also implemented to ensure the achievement of the sustainable development goals, as well as reinforce prior commitments made in policies aiming at eliminating gender-based violence, trafficking and additional barriers related to protection and promotion of gender equality (ASEAN, 2022:1). The work plan consists of five regional plans including:

- "Elimination of Violence against Women"
- "Elimination of Violence against Children"
- "Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children"
- "ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection"
- "Prevent and Counter the Rise of Radicalization and Violent Extremism"

(ASEAN, 2022:1).

In addition to relevant ASEAN bodies, the work plan was developed in close cooperation with civil society organizations with the aim of operating as a framework to guide interventions and projects related to gender issues. Furthermore, it is intended to respond to development trajectories with a special focus on:

"[...] gender data and statistics, gender responsive climate and disaster resilience, gender approach to enhancing safety and protection of women and girls, women, peace and security, women's economic empowerment and future of work, and gender responsive-governance and leadership" (ASEAN, 2022:3).

Since the framework is meant not only for for sectoral bodies but also member states and the private sector, the goals do not apply to all agents. The initiatives mentioned above are therefore non-binding and should be applied in contexts where it is applicable depending on the developmental stage of each country (ASEAN, 2022:3).

The ASEAN Committee on Women Work Plan 2021-2025 was chosen due to its overarching reflection of ASEAN's commitment to gender equality. Since the work plan governs most of the policies in place to promote equal opportunity, it sets the priority areas of ASEAN's broad

spectrum of political commitment, (ASEAN, 2022:1-2). In that sense, the work plan represents an adequate framework for gender discourse which to some extent reflects institutions' understanding and conceptualizing of gender equality.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. Postcolonial feminism

The analysis of power and how equality can be achieved through strategies to combat uneven distribution of resources is central in development studies (McEwan, 2001:96). From a historical perspective, research on equality has tended to study the issue through a universalistic approach with the assumption that female oppression is coherent without acknowledging divisions among women due to aspects such as religion, nationality and race (McEwan, 2001:96; Mohanty, 2003:33). In other words, women have been defined as a coherent group with similar problems and goals (Mohanty, 2003:30). Until the 1980s, Western feminists consistently focused on female exploitation as a result of male dominance, while women from the global south's writings on feminism have centered around the complex interrelationships between feminism, the inheritance of slavery, colonialism, and imperial conquests (Mohanty, 2003:52).

Western feminism is therefore, in many ways, a product of Western understandings of gender relations, but according to postcolonial feminism, that Western-centric political vision should no longer be tolerated (McEwan, 2001:96-97). Scholars' tendency to universalize their own experiences in Western feminist discourse needs to be destabilized as these "normative" perspectives have led to a homogenous category of "third world women", characterized as silent victims (Sposato & Rumens, 2021:1206; McEwan, 2001:99). This phenomenon is addressed by Mohanty (in McEwan, 2001:99) as the "colonialist move". Arising from a binary model of gender, Western women have been classified as the prior category, while "third world women" have been portrayed as the victims, outside of the "white" middle-class norms. This has led policies to affect women differently depending on social cultures and classes, which historically have been overlooked (Mohanty, 2003:30; McEwan, 2001:100). If it is not acknowledged that an educated woman from the middle class has different interests than an uneducated woman from a rural area, policy formulations easily get problematic and misdirected (Mohanty, 2003:30; Lewis & Mills, 2003:52).

Postcolonial feminism attempts to shatter the binary of Western women and "third world women" by acknowledging that society is shaped by historical events such as colonialism and the current structures which uphold certain forms of European imperialism (Sposato & Rumens, 2021:1202 & 1205; Lewis & Mills, 2003:51). By concentrating on how gender, ethnicity, and

race are interconnected the theory consists of three key tenets. Firstly, the theory acknowledges that the global world has been influenced by historical events that have paved the way for gender oppression (Sposato & Rumens, 2021:12015). Secondly, it aims at analyzing how women from the global south have been represented in feminist discourse (Sposato & Rumens, 2021:12015). Rather than reproducing Western knowledge forms, the theory attempts to highlight disparate experiences among women and allow women from the global south to speak for themselves (McEwan, 2001:101 & 105). To redirect these colonialist power relations, feminist scholars need to acknowledge how their own social identity might entail certain biases (McEwan, 2001:106). Thirdly, postcolonial feminism emphasizes how culture is interconnected with gender, ethnicity, and race (Sposato & Rumens, 2021:12015) and how there is no reasonable generalization of female oppression (Mohanty, 2003:32).

One of the most criticized aspects of the theory is that it is relatively institutionalized and therefore used mostly by intellectual elites from a Western-based academy (McEwan, 2001:102). Furthermore, since postcolonial feminism focuses on how historical events have shaped modern society, some scholars argue that it fails to address postcolonial futures, and since it is a rather theoretical approach it is at times hard to adopt in practice. Another dilemma concerns how the theory prioritizes the question of inequality over life-or-death situations concerning the exploitation of labor, human rights, and child prostitution (McEwan, 2001:102-103). Although these concerns are valid, the theory is still fitting for this study. First of all, this thesis does not have a direct effect on life or death situations (McEwan, 2001:102-103) and should only be seen as an academic contribution to future studies on the same topic. In addition, the theory is primarily used to understand underlying notions of problem representations of gender equality. Therefore, the theory´s criticism surrounding the failure to address postcolonial futures is not relevant to this study. Lastly, the theory's tendency to mainly be used in Western literature is an issue, and my position as a "Western woman" is recognized as an ethical consideration, which is elaborated on in the methods chapter.

Since postcolonial feminism explores how gender relations are constructed outside of Western feminist theory, a key aspect is to analyze concepts and their underlying representations. Research on conceptual problems related to how women are perceived is therefore crucial for further advancement in feminist literature, which is what this study is aiming to do (Sposato & Rumens, 2021:1202 & 1216-1216).

3.2. What is the problem represented to be?

The work plan will be analyzed through "What is the problem represented to be" (WPR). WPR is a type of discourse analysis, which is based on the notion that language can be used as a meaning system (Bacchi, 2000:45). The WPR approach refers to how analysis of how concepts, binaries, and categories operate in a policy, reveals particular styles of governing, or the standpoints that lie behind the initiative (Bacchi, 2009:6-7; Bacchi, 2000:46). Unlike the traditional view that governments deal with problems through policy, the WPR method assumes that governments are active in the creation of certain policy problems (Bacchi, 2009:1). This logic is based on the assumption that the way a policy presents a problem carry implications for how other people will think and act according to it. Therefore, the framework recommends analysis of proposals by working backward from the initiative itself to the problems represented in the policy (Bacchi, 2003:3). The framework is therefore based on two premises. First, the theory assumes that we are governed through problematizations, a central part of governing processes aiming at reducing a problem's complexity by manipulating how an issue is put forward. Secondly, research should focus more on problematizations, rather than problems, to uncover how problematizations are framed in government policies (Bacchi, 2009:xii). In other words, the framework focuses on how problems in a policy are put forward and presented to highlight underlying assumptions.

The "problem" in the policy proposal refers to the focal point subject to change in the initiative. In contrast to, for example, "alcohol problems", gender equality is an abstract category, which tends to cause some confusion as equality often is defined as the goal, rather than the problem. However, the aim is not to analyze gender equality as the problem, the objective is to identify problems embodied in representations of gender equality to see what problems are produced by the policy's framing of the concept (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016:64-65).

4. Methodology and material

4.1. Research design

A common distinction in research is the one between qualitative and quantitative research. In quantitative studies, the analysis relies on measurements and linear attributes, while qualitative research on the other hand, is more dependent on human perceptions (Stake, 2010:11). Most research relies on a mixture of qualitative and quantitative elements, but since this study engages in discourse and problem formulations, it will be classified as a qualitative one (Stake, 2010:13). The study will be conducted through a deductive exploratory approach which means that the aim is to explore something relatively unknown to formulate potential generalizations which eventually can be used as future hypotheses in new research (Casula et al, 2021:1707).

Since the aim of the study is to analyze how gender equality is represented in the ACW WP, the study will engage in qualitative discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is used to explore in what way linguistics can be utilized in research to understand how the social world is constructed. The approach emphasizes reflexivity of the context in which social interactions shape and give meaning to our understanding of social reality (Philips & Hardy, 2002:2-3). In general terms, discourse concerns how we use language as a meaning system. So although discourses are embodied and studied through texts, symbols, and spoken words, the discourse itself, exists beyond the texts in which it is formulated (Philips & Hardy, 2002:3-4). The study will use discourse to pinpoint representations of gender equality and analyze how formulations of the concept might affect the outcome of the ACW WP. By identifying concepts, categories, and binaries, discourse will be used as a tool for understanding the underlying notions of the representation of "gender equality", and possible outcomes of these framings (Grip, 2016:95).

4.2. Data

The WPR approach is generally used in analyses of texts, such as speeches, legislation, and statistical data (Bacchi, 2009:20). Stated in the introduction, the focus of this study is on gender equality in ASEAN. As the study is delimited to the prevailing discourse of texts from the policymaking stage in ASEAN, the primary data is gathered from the ACW WP. The policy was chosen because it is the most recent ASEAN policy covering gender equality at whole, and not only certain aspects of it. Contrary to Bacchi's recommendations (2009:20) to include some additional documents related to the studied policy, this study will "only" focus on the ACW

WP. That is because the ACW WP. The aim of this study is thus to analyze this specific policy and its implications in depth, rather than cover a wider variety of texts.

Additional sources included in the study have been gathered from social sciences journals, peer-reviewed publications, ASEAN policies, and books related to gender equality in Southeast Asia. The literature was chosen based on its relevance to the discussed topics and keywords used for the sampling included, gender equality, postcolonial feminism, discourse analysis, WPR, and ASEAN. Most of the literature was collected through snowball sampling which is one of the most widely employed sampling methods in qualitative research. Snowballing refers to how researchers access information through other studies related to the same issue, eventually collecting more and more data, hence creating the "snowball" effect (Noy, 2008:330).

4.3. Data analysis

WPR is used to identify binaries, concepts, and categories, and to analyze how they intertwine and give shape to problem formulations in policies (Bacchi, 2009:7). By identifying implied problem representations and the conceptual logic of that representation, the framework is efficient to understand in what way initiatives are active in creating policy problems (Bacchi, 2009:3-5; Bacchi, 2000:47-48). The framework consists of 6 interrelated questions which can be applied to most types of problem representations. They are as follows:

1. What's the problem (e.g. of "gender inequality", "drug use/abuse", "economic development", "global warming", "childhood obesity", "irregular migration", etc.) represented to be in a specific policy or policies?
2. What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions (conceptual logics) underlie this representation of the "problem" (problem representation)?
3. How has this representation of the "problem" come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the "problem" be conceptualized differently?
5. What effects (discursive, subjectification, lived) are produced by this representation of the "problem"?
6. How and where has this representation of the problem been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been and/or how can it be disrupted and replaced?

(Bacchi, 2009:2)

Since the study is exploratory and not explanatory, intending to explore how gender equality is framed in the ACW WP, rather than explain the causes of the problem representation, questions 3 and 6 have been excluded. The focus will thus be on the prevailing discourse of gender equality and its effects, rather than how the discourse has emerged. To adjust the method to my study, the research questions that will guide the analysis have been altered accordingly:

1. What are the problems related to gender equality represented to be in the ACW Work Plan 2021-2025?
2. What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of gender equality?
3. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation?
4. What effects are produced by this representation of gender equality?

The aim of question 1 is to identify hidden problem representations in the work plan by working backward from the proposed solution and pinpoint implicit problematizations (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016: 21, Bacchi, 2009:3). Question 2 engages with the assumptions related to the identified problem representations. The goal is thus to figure out the deep-seated cultural values and conceptual logic behind the problem representation, which Bacchi (2009:5) defines as the context that needs to be present for the problem representation to make sense. Question 3 concerns limits in the problem representations and raises awareness of what is failed to be problematized in the policy. The objective is thus to raise attention to misrepresentations that contribute to simplifications of complex issues (Bacchi, 2009:12-13). The fourth question considers the outcomes of specific problem representations. This mainly concerns 3 types of overlapping effects including discursive effects, subjectification effects, and lived effects. Discursive effects refer to effects that follow from deep-seated assumptions present in the problem representations, that further shape future research (Bacchi, 2009:16). Subjectification effects address how subjects are embodied in discourse and how we tend to make sense of the world from standpoints presented in the discourse. Lastly, the lived effects refer to how problem representation has a material impact on people's lives (Bacchi, 2009:17-18).

4.4. Ethical considerations

To avoid ethical dilemmas, it is important to acknowledge my role as the researcher. In a discourse analysis, reflection of reality will inevitably be influenced by my experiences and situated knowledge. Since my knowledge is encapsulated in a specific socio-political context, it is important to practice reflexivity to make sure that the problem representations that I am

meant to uncover does not influence the study (Bacchi, 2003:1-3). Since I am a European university student, my background might restrict my ability to critically and objectively analyze how gender equality is framed. But by reflecting upon these limitations and being humble towards that the fact that this study nowhere close produce a universal truth, I hope to contribute to the literature by challenging preconceived notion of gender equality as a concept. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the historical aspects which underpin our understanding of feminism to make sure that I do not reinforce certain stereotypes or framings of the people the policy is concerning. This is exemplified by McEwan (2001:99), who argues that feminist scholars tend to universalize their own experience in feminist discourse which has resulted in "non-western women" to be characterized as silent victims (Sposato & Rumens, 2021:1206).

The analyzed document was retrieved from ASEAN's website, in which all publications are available to the public. In addition, it is stated in the ACW WP, that the text is free to quote and reprint, which implies that the data collection does not entail any implications for ethical dilemmas (ASEAN, 2022). However, although the documents used in the study are freely available, the authors must be frequently acknowledged throughout the text, which they are through written references. Lastly, it is worth acknowledging that the policy was written in a specific socio-political context to decrease gender inequality. The policy is therefore analyzed with that in mind, to make sure that I avoid unfair representations of the authors.

4.4.1.   Reflexivity

Drawing on the assumption that problem representations to some extent shape our conceptual logic of reality, Bacchi (2009:19) acknowledges that it is important to reflect on our own biases to ensure that we do not adopt certain problem representations without questioning them. In this case, it is important to recognize that gender equality historically has been defined through Western understandings of gender relations which need to be acknowledged to conduct the study as objectively as possible (McEwan, 2001:96-97). To avoid that my own biases influences the interpretation of the data, the analysis is conducted along with a written journal where the findings are reflected upon. The journal consists of initial interpretations of the findings, as well as subsequent reflections made later down in the process. In addition, the study has been conducted with support from my supervisor and fellow classmates who have challenged me to reflect upon my work.

5. Analysis

5.1. Introduction

The analysis is based on Bacchi's (2009) WPR questions which have been altered to answer the research question *"How is gender equality represented in the ASEAN Committee on Women Work Plan 2021-2025, and what policy implications are produced by this framing of the concept"*. The chapter starts with identifying problem representations of gender equality in the ACW WP. Section two aims to pinpoint deep-seated presuppositions and assumptions that underly these representations of the problem. The third section focuses on silences in the ACW WP and on what is left unproblematic in the representations. Lastly, the chapter analyzes the effects that are produced by these representations of gender equality. Throughout the text, a postcolonial feminist approach is applied to the analysis to highlight how the ACW WP in some ways might be problematic from that point of view.

5.2. What are the problems related to gender equality represented to be in the ACW Work Plan 2021-2025?

The first part summarizes the findings based on the first research question "What are the problems related to gender equality represented to be in the ACW Work Plan 2021-2025?". Drawing on the assumption presented in Bacchi (2009:2-3), that the formulation of certain policy interventions reveals how the issue is conceptualized, this section aims to identify the "problems" of gender equality. The analysis reveals four overarching problem representations in the ACW WP. They are:

- Women as victims as the result of limited social protection and social norms
- Gender-based discrimination due to deficient gender mainstreaming
- A lack of social norms to enable female participation in public decision-making
- Limited access to resources for women to participate in the labor market

The following sections presents each problem representation more thoroughly.

5.2.1. Women as victims as the result of limited social protection and social norms

The ACW WP raise the issue of gender-based violence as a "global concern" (ASEAN, 2022:33) that "[...] not only negatively affects women's and girls' physical and mental health and well-being but also entails social and economic consequences and costs for families, communities, and societies" (ASEAN, 2022:33). The most common forms of violence, represented as a "problem" for gender equality are "[...] domestic violence, rape, trafficking, violence against migrant women" (ASEAN, 2022:36). According to the ACW WP, these problems are present due to "[...] deep-rooted traditional beliefs, and cultural norms in the community" (ASEAN, 2022:37), and "[...] strong patriarchal and male dominated ideology in society" (ASEAN, 2022:37). The proposed suggestion to decrease the harmful effects of these "[...] problems" is to invest in diverse support systems such as "[...] health providers and law-enforcement agencies" (ASEAN, 2022:38), as well as increase the "[...] budget to advance protection of women and girls who get in trouble with all forms of violence against women" (ASEAN, 2022:37).

Women are further described as victims in crisis as they are in "[...] a more vulnerable position" (ASEAN, 2022:37), in comparison to men. This problem exists far beyond a certain context and is applicable in armed conflicts, climate change-related risks, and global health crises. There is "[...] growing evidence that women and girls are disproportionately impacted by climate change and disasters" (ASEAN, 2022:26), which is explained by "[...] prevailing gender discrimination, inequality and inhibiting gender roles" (ASEAN, 2022:22). It is also acknowledged that "[...] gender dimensions of climate change, gender and the supporting social realities in the ASEAN region are largely ignored or least prioritized" (ASEAN, 2022:25) and that women must be engaged "[...] at all levels in disaster risk responses and management" (ASEAN, 2022:29). Women's subjectification as the "victim" is explained through harmful social norms and deeply ingrained gender stereotypes, as well as absence in medical and law enforcement which leads to the problem representation of "Women as victims due to limited social protection and social norms".

5.2.2. Gender-based discrimination due to deficient gender mainstreaming

A recurring problem present throughout the work plan is the lack of gender mainstreaming. Not only is there a lack of general awareness regarding gender relations in policies as "[...] gender mainstreaming is mostly understood and measured based on equal representation of both men

and women" (ASEAN. 2022:22). There is also an "[...] absence of best practices on gender mainstreaming in policies" which results in that "[...] legal frameworks and policies that promote gender mainstreaming are not effectively or sufficiently implemented and monitored" (ASEAN. 2022:22). This problem is recurring in almost all of the chapters regardless if the topic is health, education or female participation in decision-making. The reasons behind this are described as "absence of best practice on gender mainstreaming in policies". The problem of gender relations not being acknowledged enough in national policies is thus blamed on the inefficient implementation of gender mainstreaming, which presents one of the problem representations of gender equality.

5.2.3.   A lack of social norms to enable female participation in public decision-making

Female participation in decision-making is portrayed as crucial, yet as far-fetched. While it is recognized that female decision-making is one of the key determinators for change in regard to gender equality, the ACW WP acknowledges that "[...] social attitude towards women in the role of leadership and decision-making process is not supportive" (ASEAN, 2022:61). It is also recognized that lack of resources such as fundings to women's organizations and support capacity building contributes to low levels of female absence in public decision-making. But due to recurring formulations such as "[...] traditional practice of male dominance is a barrier for women to take on leadership roles in decision making" (ASEAN, 2022:62), and "[...] women of certain ethnicities especially in male dominated and patriarchal societies are limited in their participation in leadership roles and decision-making" (ASEAN, 2022:46), the problem is represented as male-biased social norms.

5.2.4.   Limited access to resources for women to participate in the labor market

Women are portrayed as secondary in the labor market in comparison to men. Not only does "[...] fewer women hold formal paid employment" (ASEAN, 2022:52), they are further clustered in "[...] low-skilled, low-paid jobs and are more likely to be unpaid contributing family worker" (ASEAN, 2022:52). According to the ACW WP, does "[...] structural barriers such as lack of access to productive assets, finance faced by women entrepreneurs limit their growth and development" (ASEAN, 2022:53). In other words, women are often faced by gender-based barriers which makes it challenging for them to enter the labor market which

further contributes to gender-based wage gaps. According to the ACW WP, these obstacles are partly the result of "[...] access to productive assets" (ASEAN, 2022:53) "[...] limited mobility, voice and representation in all levels of decision-making process" (ASEAN, 2022:54). The problem is thus represented as "Limited access to resources for women to participate in the labor market".

5.3. What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of gender equality?

In the next part the second WPR question "What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of gender equality?" is applied to the ACW WP. By scrutinizing concepts, categories, and binaries the question is used to reveal the underlying notions of the problem representations identified in the text. The conceptual premises revealed four key assumptions embedded in the discourse, which are further elaborated on in the next section.

- Market assumptions
- Heteronormative gender relations
- Gender equality as universalistic
- A female issue

5.3.1. Market assumptions

Despite discussion of many aspects related to gender equality, the work plan systematically refers to an economic rationality that contains some dominant presumptions throughout the text. The work plan does, for example, present one of the key concepts, women's "empowerment" as something that could "[...] provide the ASEAN Economic Community with an unparalleled opportunity for growth and an effective driving force for realizing the ASEAN Vision 2025" (ASEAN, 2022:50). Likewise, female education is perceived as a platform to increase economic growth (ASEAN, 2022:51), and equal access to "[...] sustainable livelihoods, social protection, decision-making, decent work, and financial inclusion" (ASEAN, 2022:6) is recognized as important factors to stimulate the economy. In regard to gender-based violence it is mentioned that girls' health entails "[...] economic consequences and costs for families, communities, and societies" (ASEAN, 2022:33). In addition, it is mentioned that "ASEAN's early engagement with gender was conceived through the lens of economic and social development" (ASEAN, 2022:61) and that "[...] this approach continues today, which may explain why most ASEAN

gender policies are concerned with women's economic or social status and not with their participation in politics" (ASEAN, 2022:61). In this context, gender equality as a concept seems to be embedded in a human rights approach with the means to accomplish certain economic ends.

5.3.2. Heteronormative gender relations

Despite that one of the key concepts in the ACW WP is "gender equality", no explicit definition of either gender or equality is presented. It seems as if the work plan adopts a heteronormative perspective in which gender relations revolve around men and women. Binaries, such as men/women, girls/boys, and masculine/feminine are referred to throughout the text, and formulations such as, "[...] superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women" (ASEAN, 2022:35) imply that gender is classified as biologically constructed. The representation of men and women as two homogeneous categories, is from a postcolonial feminist view, reinforced by a binary model of gender shaped by European imperialism (Sposato & Rumens, 2021:1202). Drawing on the postcolonial feminist approach, introduced in the theoretical framework, it is possible to argue that the work plan recreates a Western-centric political vision which further creates a barrier to gender equality in Southeast Asia (McEwan, 2001:96-97).

5.3.3. Gender equality as universalistic

Even though ASEAN recognizes the intersection of sex, class, religion, and race in relation to gender equality, women are for the most part described as a coherent category with similar needs and goals. It is mentioned that there are issues that affect "[...] women and girls of all socio-economic backgrounds in both developing and developed countries" (ASEAN, 2022:33). However, the identified acknowledgments are generally limited to the introduction sections of the chapters and there are no explicit measures directed towards the issue. Drawing on the postcolonial feminist approach, female oppression is often interpreted as universalistic (Lewis & Mills, 2003:53). By basing the policy formulations on Western understandings of gender relations, the work plan recreates a Western-centric political vision which is largely reflected in the work plan as dimensions of female oppression to some extent is overlooked. The underlying notions of gender equality are thus built on a relatively narrow interpretation of the "female struggle", based on binaries such as men/women and masculine/feminine.

5.3.4.   A female issue

Throughout the paper, there is a notable absence of recognition of the role that men and boys play in achieving gender equality. In regard to the problem representation of "gender-based violence as the result of limited social protection and harmful gender stereotypes", the proposed efforts to counteract the violence are directed towards support systems for women, rather than preventive measures towards men. In addition, it is stated that "[...] higher numbers of women in parliament generally contribute to stronger attention to women's issues" (ASEAN, 2022:59) and that "[...] women's full political participation is much needed for gender issues to be placed at the centre of an institution's political agenda" (ASEAN, 2022:59). Analyzing the identity categories existent in the work plan men are thus ascribed as sub-players, with a hegemonic status, while women are ascribed as the subject matters. In the ACW WP, it is stated that women are "framed in terms of protection rather than empowerment" (2022:61), but in the analysis, women were also portrayed as the "solution". In line with the "heforshe" approach (Shukla & Singh, 2022:226), these framings imply some deep-seated presumptions that gender equality is "A female issue" and that women are categorized as both victims and agents of change.

5.4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation?

The following section contains an analysis based on the third WPR question "What is left unproblematic in this problem representation". The aim is to pinpoint the "silences" in these representations and how they are problematic from a postcolonial feminist point of view. As established in the preceding section, there is no clear definition of gender in the work plan, but based on the analysis it seems to be heteronormative and binaries such as masculine/feminine are commonly used to categorize the concept. According to Young (2020:104-105), these nonflexible ideas of gender often arise in societies with strong patriarchal norms and result in oppressive conditions that only "empower" a certain group of people. The margins of society, such as minorities and people that are part of the LGBTQ+ community are thus excluded from the policy benefits since they do not fit in a Western model of society, "[...] developed solely for the interests of corporate capitalism" (Young, 2020:112). The homogenized treatment of women does not take into account how gender relations go beyond the heteronormative approach adopted in the work plan. By not acknowledging people with other gender identities,

as well as non-binary people, gender stereotypes are reproduced which further reinforces the social norms that the work plan attempts to counteract.

According to Mohanty (2003:30), "female" is not something you are born to be, it is a concept developed through social components and is bound to contextual premises. Female, as a concept, is therefore composed of several different aspects which vary from one individual to another. Likewise, the challenges that upper-class women faces should not be assumed to be the same as the challenges low-income women face (Lewis & Mills, 2003:52-53). A homogenized approach such as the one presented in the work plan, is thus problematic as it assumes a unity between women based on a gender hierarchy with a general notion of "female subordination". Since the work plan only mentions this issue a limited number of times, without any measures to address it, the needs of various groups of women are overlooked. Unequal power relations between women of different social classes, races, religions, and socio-economic backgrounds are therefore left highly unexamined which results in that resources used to combat gender inequality only reach certain groups of women.

In addition, the work plan mostly focuses on the female aspects of gender inequality, assuming that it is a "female issue". Women are thus portrayed as the victim, as well as the solution. On one hand, women are described as exposed, ignored, least prioritized, and vulnerable. On the other, they are encouraged to participate as leaders, managers, negotiators, mediators, and responders to achieve peace and economic growth (2022:43-44). Presenting women as a resource, parallel to their subjectification is somewhat problematic. While it legitimizes women's role in society, it can lead institutions to ultimately use gender equality as means to achieve other goals. This was outlined in the previous section, where some of the measures to combat inequality ultimately are used to serve economic means. Although it is possible to argue that the cause of change is irrelevant as long as the results lead to increased equality, it is important to recognize that there is a risk of assuming that all development is good development. As stated earlier, women should not be seen as a coherent group with similar needs. Just because some measures results in positive effects for some women, does not mean that it give the same effect for others.

5.5. What effects are produced by this representation of gender equality?

In line with Bacchi's approach, some problem representations affect certain members of social groups more than others (2009:15). These effects are overlapping and interconnected but can be generalized into three groups, namely, discursive, subjectification, and lived effects. Discursive effects refer to the limits that are imposed in a policy and how problem representations give expression to deep-seated assumptions (Bacchi, 2009:16). The subjectification effects portray how subjects and subjectivities are constituted in a text and how those presuppositions affect social relationships. The approach draws on the notion that depending on how a position is portrayed, people subjected to the discourse tend to make sense of their reality from this standpoint (Bacchi, 2009:16). The lived effect refers to how problem representations have a material impact in people's lives (Bacchi, 2009:17). The aim of the last section of the analysis is thus to identify the effects which are produced by the above-mentioned problem representations.

5.5.1. Women as victims as the result of limited social protection and social norms

The first problem representation of "Women as victims as the result of limited social protection and social norms", assumes that gender-based violence and women's role as victims is the result of social norms and lack of public services. Therefore, most of the measures are aimed at increasing the capacity for health and law agencies to "help" women, rather than preventive measures against men. These measures give expression to the discursive effects that the representation of women as victims is a "female issue". As a result, the subjectification effects give reinforced presuppositions of male dominance and gender stereotypes in which women are portrayed as victims. In addition, the problem representation implies that the lived effects benefit men more positively than it benefits women. This is partly because of the framing of gender equality as "A female issue" since the implications of the framing imply that women have to take on the responsibility to achieve change, while men are perceived as sub-players without any responsibilities. However, it is important to acknowledge that the ACW WP´s recognition of the importance of more resources distributed to health agencies could contribute to some major health benefits for those who have been exposed to violence or threats.

5.5.2. Gender-based discrimination due to deficient gender mainstreaming

In the ACW WP, gender-based discrimination is framed as the result of deficient gender mainstreaming and limited efforts to achieve gender equality. The proposals to increase efforts towards gender mainstreaming is a good step to combat inequality and, if successfully implemented, it could contribute to more equal opportunities for men and women in many areas. However, the problem representation does give expression to some discursive effects which imply that women's rights are not as much of a priority in comparison to men's rights. These assumptions could give rise to some subjectification effects which impact how men and women make sense of their social reality. If the social norms described in the work plan are widely accepted as reality, that might lead women to "accept" that they do not have the same rights as men. Since many gender stereotypes are reinforced in the "Work plan", the lived effects could be that women continue to be overlooked in policies. The problem representation further implies that no real change can be made before the society elites or policy-makers decides to do so. At the same time, it is recognized that gender issues rarely are prioritized which points to a dilemma. It is not likely that solution presented in the ACW WP will work, if it is governed by the same "problem" that it is trying to solve.

5.5.3. A lack of social norms to enable female participation in public decision-making

In the problem representation of gender equality as a "Lack of social norms to enable female participation in public decision-making", gender is defined as universalistic. The discursive effects are thus a heteronormative view of gender relations in which social norms are defined by two groups consisting of men and women. A subjectification effect could result in a wide acceptance of a social hierarchy in which men are superior to women. If women assume that their ability to participate in public decision-making is limited due to social norms, the lived effects could result in even less female participation since efforts to participate in decision-making might be perceived as unnecessary. In addition, it can be argued that the universalistic approach to women and what it means to be female creates some unevenly distributed effects. Since it is not acknowledged that women face different challenges depending on their background the measures to counteract the problem are rather excluding for women that does not "fit" in the female stereotype.

5.5.4. Limited access to resources for women to participate in the labor market

The problem representation of limited access to resources for women to participate in the labor market indicates that there is a social hierarchy based on social norms. The discursive effects are that women are portrayed as secondary compared to men and that resources mainly are accessible to men. If the restriction of resources for women to join the workforce is accepted as a part of social reality, women might tend to turn to care work or other domestic chores. On one hand, it is good that it is acknowledged that the uneven distribution of resources makes it hard for women to join the workforce since it raises the interest of public opinion. On the other hand, reinforcing these social norms might lead the lived effects to express themselves through reduced female participation in the labor market and larger wage gaps between men and women. In addition, that would widen the gender gap and make it harder to achieve gender equality.

6. Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, the study aims to analyze how gender equality is framed and what policy implications are produced by this framing of the concept. The purpose is therefore not to determine the effectiveness of the policy. However, due to the insights gained after examining the policy, the results could be useful for future policy analysis. In terms of contribution to literature, the thesis serves as a contribution to critical postcolonial feminist research, (in)equality studies, and discursive policy analysis. The following section presents the summary of findings in relation to the research aim and question. In addition, the analysis highlights some silences and effects of the problem representations, to discern the understanding of the concept in the ACW WP.

Guided by the selected WPR questions, four overarching problem representations of gender equality have been identified. These are: women as victims as the result of limited public services and social norms; gender-based discrimination due to deficient gender mainstreaming; a lack of social norms that enable female participation in public decision-making; limited access to resources for women to participate in the labor market. By analyzing identified binaries, categories, and key concepts, four presuppositions that support the problematizations were pinpointed. Firstly, the ACW WP refers to an economic rationality that could indicate that gender equality is used as a means to accomplish other ends of economic nature. Furthermore, the ACW WP uses a rather universalistic and heteronormative approach to gender issues which excludes many people from the improvements initiated in the policy. Lastly, gender (in)equality is portrayed as "A female issue" that not just affect women more than men, but also needs to be solved by women.

What is left unproblematic by these assumptions is that it is rather contradictory to determine female participation as the solution to gender inequality, while at the same time acknowledging that the majority of women do not have the means to create this type of change. In addition, the contribution of postcolonial feminism highlights how intersectionality to some extent is absent in the ACW WP. Accordingly, gender inequality is referred to from a universalistic and heteronormative perspective, which results in that unequal power relations between women are left unexamined and overlooked. As a result, the incentives to combat gender inequality and increase female empowerment risk only reaching a certain group of women. Furthermore, since gender equality is framed as "A female issue", men tend to be portrayed as passive sub-players which shifts the responsibilities back to the "victims". The problem representations further

imply some effects on female participation in the decision-making process and labor market. In this case, the male-biased social norms that are presented as a reflection of social reality might discourage women from participating which further could slow down the progress towards equality.

In conclusion it can be stated the problem related to gender equality in the ACW WP is represented as lack of resources due to social norms and deficient gender mainstreaming. These problems are rooted in a patriarchal hierarchy reinforcing gender stereotypes based on the underlying assumptions that gender equality is a female issue. Although the ACW WP recognize the importance of addressing inequalities between women, the deep-seated presuppositions reflected in the analysis imply a rather heteronormative understanding of gender which further reproduces a universalistic approach to gender equality.

6.1. Suggestions for future research

The aim of this study is to deep dive into the ACW WP to analyze the representation of gender equality and its policy implications, which is why only one document was retrieved for analysis. For a more comprehensive analysis of the policy implementation process, it would be interesting to use the same method but include process documents. In that way, it might be possible to determine if the framing of the concept is presented differently depending on when and where in the process it is collected. Another objective that would be interesting to pursue an analysis of gender equality as a concept, based on the WPR questions that were excluded from this study. They are "How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?" (Bacchi, 2009:2) and "How and where has this representation of the problem been produced, disseminated, and defended? How has it been and/or how can it be disrupted and replaced?" (Bacchi, 2009:2). These questions focus on the underlying reasons to why a concept is framed in a certain way, which has not been addressed in this study. If the aim is to understand how these representations have come about, these questions are helpful as they increase the understanding of how concepts sometimes are disrupted and replaced throughout the policy process. Implications of future research could therefore be a similar study, but with a focus on the two excluded WPR questions.

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