Dr Anu Mundkur on changes as a result of women's peace and security

MONASH University GENDER PEACE CHANGE

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What has changed in civil society and women's security in the region as a result of WPS?

I think what has changed in civil society is that civil society organisations are being recognised as a legitimate actor in the security space – as having a significant perspective on what constitutes sustainable security.

Also, regional Women, Peace and Security platforms, platforms like the Asia-Pacific Women's Alliance for Peace and Security (https://apwaps.net) have created a space for collaboration and conversations across Asia and the Pacific to bring the peace and security issues that matter to women to the forefront.

What we are also seeing is the nuanced ways in which civil society is holding government's accountable to their international WPS commitments – this is especially true in Australia.

I think when it comes to women's security, we really have a mixed record in the region. On the one hand, women's economic participation is increasing (varying between 50 - 80%), and one could argue that this is contributing to increased economic security for women. Female workforce participation rates vary among ASEAN countries.

However, if you look at the participation pillar of the WPS agenda – the picture is less exciting. According to UN Women (https://www.ipu.org/resourc es/publications/infographics/2020-03/women-in-politics-2020) in Philippines, Vietnam and Lao PDR the percentage of women in ministerial positions is around 28%. Lower percentages are seen in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar and Cambodia at around 19%, 16%, 14%, 11% and 9 % respectively.

The story is grim when it comes to violence against women. The Asia Foundation's recent report, "*The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia* (https:// asiafoundation.org/publication/state-conflict-violence-asia), finds that gender-based violence is one of the deadliest forms of violence in the region. It often kills more people than armed conflict and other forms of escalated violence that typically receive more attention from policymakers and development actors.

We often think of Asia as a region of peace in a world ridden with conflict. However, in Asia, what we see are mostly subnational conflicts and communal violence. In Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, land and natural resource conflicts are significant. In India and Pakistan, the politicisation of ethnic and religious identities has frequently resulted in violence, and this is often played out on women's bodies with increasing sexual violence against women and girls. Further, in Asia, we are seeing the rise of extremism in the name of religion which has contributed to the closing of spaces for women's activism and to an increase in violence against women. Yet, women are at the front lines of countering extremism and violence. During the Marawi crisis, for example, women as "Hijab Troopers" worked directly with communities on peacebuilding and rebuilding public trust.

The pandemic I think, has highlighted how fragile our gains can be.

In Asia and the Pacific, the significant restrictions on movement, enforced by the security sector, have a disproportionate impact on women's human rights, including the right of access to information and freedom of expression. Given the underrepresentation of women in military and policing and lack of gender sensitisation training the interactions women have with law enforcement are not sensitive to their needs and further expose them to harassment.

Where women's rights are already under threat, the responses to COVID-19, risks a further backslide. In Afghanistan, for example, women's activism to the included in peace talks risks being marginalised as national priorities shift and as barriers to their participation increase when the trend moves towards online engagement.

Women Human Rights Defenders face particular challenges – as during these COVID 19 lockdown's their work on digital platforms comes under greater scrutiny as governments across the region adopt broad digital surveillance.

I think for us in the region we need to really focus on the localisation of the WPS agenda – to address some of the issues I have highlighted. If I am correct, only eleven countries in this region have a WPS National Action Plan. For more than a year now we have been waiting on Australia's NAP. National Action Plans are one way in which the WPS agenda can be localised to address critical security issues facing diverse women and girls. There are renewed calls at the moment for and AEASN Regional Plan on WPS – which could be a pathway to localise WPS in a regional context.

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