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Women, Peace and Security in ASEAN: Need For Distinct Action Plan

By Tamara Nair

Synopsis

ASEAN's move towards a post-2015 community presents an opportune moment to relook at issues surrounding women and their role in this envisioned integration. This is especially so in addressing women's roles, in a milieu of change and reformation, in bringing about and maintaining peace in the region.

Commentary

THE UNITED Nations Security Council Resolution, UNSCR 1325, adopted in 2000, is based on four pillars – prevention of violence against women; protection from sexual and gender-based violence; participation of women in all levels of decision-making; and women's effective and sustained involvement in relief and recovery. There are concerns that the envisioned regional economic integration will perpetuate a gendered ASEAN, which prioritises other interests over gender justice.

These concerns are not unjustified given that a World Health Organisation study reveals that 37 per cent of women in Southeast Asia (similar to some African and eastern Mediterranean states) experience some form of gender-based violence during their lifetime. Despite acknowledgement of issues of gender inequality and acting upon these through legislation, policies and programmes, ASEAN still has quite a way to go before gender-bias can be abolished in conflict and disaster relief and rehabilitation.

Women, peace and security (WPS) in ASEAN

ASEAN has made a number of commitments to address sexual violence against women. However, none have dealt specifically with the impact of armed conflict on

women. Neither have any of these commitments aimed to increase women's participation in political or security discussions that could potentially lead to conflict prevention. As a regional body, ASEAN has done much to promote and protect and rights of women through various mechanisms.

The ASEAN Ministerial Meetings on Women and the ASEAN Declaration of the Advancement of Women encourage ASEAN bodies and member states to integrate gender-mainstreaming in its activities. The Declaration of Elimination of Violence against Women in the ASEAN Region takes a holistic approach to eliminating violence against women including providing services to survivors of violence, understanding the nature and cause of violence, and the changing attitudes and behaviours that promote violence against women.

The ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) can be said to be the closest reflection of UNSCR 1325. Unfortunately, none of its terms specifically address issues of women, peace and security. According to some studies, Southeast Asia is 'notably under represented' as far as national or regional actions plans that engage the Security Council Resolution is concerned.

The good news is that in 2013, eight out of ten member states - Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam - have endorsed the Declaration of Commitment to end Sexual Violence in Conflict. This particular commitment from ASEAN states is noteworthy because it paves the way for increasing national (and regional) attempts to address the prevention, protection and participation pillars of UNSCR 1325.

'Gaps...and successes'

There is failure to engage women in peace and security issues across the socio-cultural, political-security and economic pillars upon which the ASEAN Community vision rests. This is a huge 'gap' in regional governance that needs to be addressed urgently. Women and girls in the region are still vulnerable to various human insecurities. The protection of women's (human) rights have essentially been confined to the socio-cultural areas and this is addressed separately from political and security concerns.

This is ironic considering women suffer disproportionately in the event of political upheavals and conflicts. In addition, a number of ASEAN member states are post-conflict societies undergoing rebuilding and almost none have any reference to women playing a key role in the process. The need to understand the impact of armed conflict on women and girls, the need to have in place institutional arrangements to guarantee their protection, and the need to invoke their full participation in the peace process, should be core concerns for these states.

In addressing the WPS agenda, the Philippines is paving the way for women's participation in peace building and peacekeeping through promoting their role as negotiators, mediators, peacekeepers as well as relief workers. They are in fact the only country in Southeast Asia to have a 1325 National Action Plan. Civil society organisations have drawn attention to the impact of the Mindanao conflict on

women's lives and they have worked to ensure that the peace process reflects the perspectives of women who were affected.

A distinct regional action plan

Ideas of conflict, violence, peace, security and justice have evolved since the inception of UNSCR 1325 15 years ago. Conflict no longer just refers to 'armed conflict' but now describes any form of disruption to human lives. Violence now needs to be recognized in ALL its forms, including disparities between rich and poor, and inequalities between man and woman.

Peace is not only an absence of conflict but an absence from want, and security should include all aspects of security as any form of human insecurity is a form of 'violence'. Justice is no longer about prosecuting perpetrators but also fighting against systems that allow such 'violence' to take place and recognising women's rights as human rights.

What ASEAN should work towards is establishing a regional action plan that is unique in the way it embraces the WPS agenda. It needs a plan that recognises all forms of 'violence' against women including economic insecurities and disadvantages in the labour force. The plan needs to recognise the role of women in areas of conflict prevention both in governance and in relief and recovery. It needs to identify women other than just being part of the 'vulnerable populations' and see women as resilient and resourceful individuals.

And given that the region is one of the most disaster-prone, this plan will need to recognise natural disasters as a form of 'conflict'. Women rapidly form informal social networks that allow for the efficient procurement of food, fuel and makeshift shelters. During and after crises, women are forthcoming in their requests for help whereas men are unlikely to do so. This resilience needs to be further enhanced by directing necessary resources their way.

The proposed regional plan should encourage humanitarian organisations to activate women as key personnel in various stages of mitigation and rehabilitation. It is only by such actions that ASEAN, as a regional community, can be one that addresses all inequalities and emerge as a just and more 'humane' institution.

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