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ASEAN's Transformative Journey: Role of Women in Peace and Security

By Noeleen Heyzer

SYNOPSIS

As ASEAN transforms itself into a region of peace and security, what role can women play to take it to the next phase of inclusive development?

COMMENTARY

ASEAN HAS embarked on exploring how to implement the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in the region. It has recently organised “an inaugural inter-sectoral dialogue on WPS issues in the ASEAN region” to support Member States implement the Joint Statement on WPS adopted at the 31st ASEAN Summit in Manila, Philippines in November 2017. This was the region’s first explicit affirmation of support for the WPS agenda.

The ASEAN Statement recognises that peace and security are essential to the achievement of sustainable development and are interconnected and vital to the future of ASEAN. It explicitly refers to the importance of women’s participation in the political, security and justice sectors and the full participation of women in peace processes as negotiators, mediators, and first responders, including in the prevention of violent extremism.

WPS Agenda Critical for Peace

Security Council Resolution 1325 (SCR 1325) is the first global framework on Women, Peace and Security. It addresses the changing nature of conflicts, the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war, problems of exclusion and injustice, and mandates women’s participation in peace and development.

The landmark SCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security provides four pillars: prevention, protection, participation, building peace and recovery, to deal with fragile peace and fragile recovery.

There is growing recognition that inclusive peace processes are more likely to lead to lasting peace. Making sure that the people involved in formal peacemaking represents a more balanced group can better address the societal grievances that have escalated into conflict and can identify the various demands for political, social and economic change.

For almost two decades, the international community has recognised that women's participation and influence in peace and security matters are decisive, not only to ensure respect for women's rights, but to include discussions on what a peaceful and just society should look like, to prevent and resolve conflicts, and sustain peace.

Need for Holistic Framework

The exclusion of a gender perspective from peace and recovery processes weakens the foundations for sustainable peace and security. The roots of conflict and injustice are multidimensional, involving economic, social, and political forces. Therefore resolving conflicts, peacebuilding and statebuilding must be addressed within a holistic framework that integrates human security, human development and human rights.

Women's rights to inheritance and land, health, education and employment are critical for recovery and sustaining peace. Addressing the problem of sexual violence as well as the underlying inequalities that render women and girls vulnerable is crucial for shifting to a future that upholds justice, restores confidence, and transforms institutions to provide greater security and support the rebuilding of communities and lives.

Including women of diverse backgrounds in the political decision-making processes that bring a country from war to peace allows different perspectives to be articulated in critical discussions about accountable governance. In short, including women makes peace processes more legitimate, reduces conflict relapse and helps to sustain peace.

Why WPS Agenda is Important for ASEAN

Asia is often thought of as a region of peace in a troubled world. However, conflict and violence are issues that affect almost every country in Asia, not just those thought of as conflict-ridden. We know about the large-scale violence in Afghanistan. But ASEAN countries are affected by subnational conflicts and inter-communal violence.

Today the largest refugee camp in the world is in Bangladesh because of the fastest Rohingya refugee exodus from the Rakhine State of Myanmar due to violence and discrimination. From Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, land and natural resource conflicts are significant problems and many communities experience violent crime.

ASEAN countries have been relatively successful at managing national contestation, but often at the price of significant subnational and local violence. Subnational conflicts

are a consequence of national state-building strategies that consolidate central power at the expense of recognising immense local diversity within ASEAN countries and peripheral areas left behind, providing space for armed violence to be used as a political and economic strategy to addressing grievances.

The politicisation of ethnic and religious identities has frequently resulted in violence and creates major risks for the future. Identity politics have often led to violence, which has sometimes spun out of control. This violence in turn has deepened the cleavages between ethnic and religious groups. Also gender-based violence is still a major problem in ASEAN, and its impacts are greater than previously understood.

Extremism and Closing of Spaces

The rise of extremism in the name of religion has further led to the closing of spaces for women and to an increase in violence against women. The use of sexual violence against the Rohingya has been widely reported. Trafficking of women and girls continues with grave consequences.

However, women are not only victims but people with both grievances and agency. Yes, some are engaged in violence and extremism. But many more are at the front lines countering extremism and violence, with strong interest in peace and recovery. During the Marawi crisis with ISIS, women acted as “Hijab Troopers” working directly with communities on peace-building and rebuilding public trust.

The point of SCR 1325 is not that women are better at building peace than other groups but that if we disregard women’s roles as leaders and peace-builders, we will be losing out on the ideas of half the population, and undermining long-term stability.

Sustaining peace is the top priority for ASEAN. It is working to sustain peace through peaceful co-existence and to undertake its next transformation towards inclusive and sustainable development. The three pillars of the ASEAN Community, namely the Political-Security Community, the Economic Community, and the Socio-Cultural Community are crucial building blocks.

However they have to be more holistic, mutually reinforcing and integrated, for the progress of ASEAN and its people. The WPS agenda is the golden thread that weaves through the three ASEAN Communities. Sustaining peace must start at building on peace where it already exists by reinforcing the norms, structures, attitudes and institutions that underpin it in all the three pillars. This peace infrastructure needs to be constantly nurtured and adapted to changing contexts and local circumstances.

WPS & ASEAN’s Transformation Journey

ASEAN’s dynamism can only be maintained through a deeper social transformation that invests in all people, ending discrimination and gender inequality, leaving no one behind as it commits to delivering the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and the SDGs. The dramatic economic, political, and social changes taking place across ASEAN offer tremendous opportunities to create positive and transformative impact for women, their communities, and the region.

For this possibility to become reality, ASEAN has to commit to country - and region - specific actions to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs on building peaceful and inclusive societies. We need to invest in collaborative and accountable leadership.

We require women's leadership to identify those attributes and assets that have sustained social cohesion, inclusive development, human rights and human security — the factors that together contribute to a sustainable, peaceful and just society.

The WPS agenda is therefore an important pathway to ASEAN's transformative journey towards sustainable development and shared prosperity. The ASEAN-Institute for Peace and Reconciliation has just established the ASEAN Women's Peace Registry. Vietnam as the next chair of ASEAN is also a member of the Security Council and has highlighted the WPS agenda to celebrate the 20th Anniversary of SCR1325 and Beijing+25 in 2020.

It is an opportune time to expand and support networks of women peace builders, humanitarian workers and community leaders working in man-made or natural disasters in ASEAN. At the same time, the empowerment of women cannot be done without also supporting men in these communities to understand the importance of protecting the rights and dignity of women and girls.

Protecting these rights must be seen to be in the interest of the community as a whole and understood as the best guarantee for advancement of the entire community.

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