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Women in Global Governance: Never Ending Fight for Equality?

By Tamara Nair

SYNOPSIS

Despite the numerous accomplishments of women in the global arena there still exists a void in global governance; this demands to be filled by greater 'gender analysis' and 'gender mainstreaming'. Are these calls justified or are they merely the pursuits of particular interests?

COMMENTARY

WOMEN TODAY stand on the shoulders of giants. That women are seen and heard on the global stage in all areas of governance is a great achievement and in large part marks the success of more than a century of protests, sacrifices and intense negotiations at so many levels by dedicated women and men, unwavering in their demands for equality.

Now women lead transnational corporations, international and non-governmental organisations; they head corporate boards and governments; they are members in the C-suite; they are educators and innovators. They have even gone to space! We see these changes globally. Global governance is about efforts to support development and safety of all humanity and addressing the role of peace-making that transcends borders. The issue of inclusivity, nevertheless, is still problematic, as the two instances below reflect.

Inclusive Pandemic Preparedness

Covid-19, tearing its way through the world, has revealed some stark deficiencies in national and global pandemic preparedness.

[Expectant mothers in China](#) face uncertainty as several hospitals and healthcare professionals prioritise virus patients. The overburdened healthcare system has seemingly left them behind when maternity nurses and doctors have been redeployed to crisis centres. With community hospitals unavailable and no public transport to take them anywhere, several women face a dire situation of where to give birth. This becomes even more daunting for those facing complicated pregnancies.

In a [recent article](#), female health workers in China have been reprimanded for requesting feminine hygiene products, deemed as non-essential. Criticised by male colleagues for “lacking diligence and a spirit of devotion” for making such requests, female health workers have had to encounter such harrowing experiences while at the same time, having to work round-the-clock looking after patients.

That the differentiated experiences women face biologically is lost on medical professionals and in pandemic preparedness seems rather offensive. More so when the majority of healthcare workers, especially frontline workers like nurses, are female. To make matters worse, female nurses bear the burden of cultural and social expectations as care givers, not only to complete strangers but also in their homes.

Yet another issue of concern pertains to female domestic workers, many of whom work in countries affected by Covid-19 in Southeast Asia. There are limited prospects for these women in their own countries hence they travel out to work. But how will travel restrictions affect them? And what is the impact on their long-term economic security and that of their dependents?

Gender impacts should be a grave concern for those who deal with global health governance given women’s immediate interaction with the old, young and sick members in their communities. [Women have not been fully incorporated](#) into global health governance mechanisms and there are insufficient policy spaces for women in national and global pandemic preparedness.

Women and Peace-building

In his [State of the Union address](#) in 2002, US President George W. Bush cited advances in women’s rights as one of the key outcomes of the US invasion of Afghanistan. Many Afghani women have benefitted from his proclamation and for the past 18 years they have experienced the freedoms gained with the entry of the Americans. For years, the US promoted the idea of safeguarding Afghan women's rights as a part of the rationale for its fight against the Taliban.

The Taliban's rule from 1996 to 2001 saw the reversal of women’s right to education, economic security, and political participation. The Taliban exerted control over women by dictating their dress, and where, how and with whom they could be seen. Violators of these rules faced terrible repercussions including flogging in public.

The recent peace deal signed between President Donald Trump and the Taliban has filled women and human rights activists with dread. The deal could jeopardize progress for Afghan women who have gained a foothold in the workplace and in political life, and this ‘peace’, however it may be defined, could very well be on the backs of women.

With the lack of women's involvement in these talks, both the Afghani and US governments flout the most fundamental tenet of the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, which is premised on the complete and sustained involvement of women in peace talks and peace-building.

The peace discussions also ignore Afghanistan's own National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325. Afghan women have always harboured fears that if their cause for freedom is lost on the international community, their newly won rights are done for. But the international community has almost no clear opinion of their plight.

Long Road Ahead

2020 is a year of anniversaries for global women's rights and equality. This year marks the 10th anniversary of UN Women. It is the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325. The year also marks the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action – the most progressive road map for gender equality and women's rights.

The international community has put in place these two landmark proclamations to protect women and involve them in all aspects of social, political and economic lives. Nations have carried forward this call to be more aware and inclusive and for the most part this commitment has helped 'reveal' women's rights from 'behind the scenes' to 'front and centre' in international affairs. The constant demand for an inclusive and gender-sensitive approach to global governance are not merely the pursuits of particular interest groups.

In many ways, a nation's quest of peace and development can be checked by the level of gender inequality that exists.

International Women's Day was marked on 8 March 2020, a celebration that goes back some 108 years and commemorates women's achievements in history across the world. Also known as the UN Day for Women's Rights and International Peace, the significance of the date comes from actions of thousands of Russian women protesting in the streets to demand change and equality in 1917, on the very day in March.

But the fact that it will take some [100 years for us to achieve any form of gender equality](#) and [202 years to arrive at economic parity](#) is a depressing thought. As the two examples above have highlighted we have not progressed enough, despite all of humanity's achievements, if we still cannot acknowledge an all-inclusive process in international affairs.

Tamara Nair is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. She is also Singapore's member for the ASEAN Women for Peace Registry.
