



ACTION BRIEF



WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY

AND COVID-19 IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Photo: UN Women/Ploy Phutpheng

What is the issue?

In countries across Asia and the Pacific, the challenge of COVID-19 is escalating. Governments are taking increasingly strong actions that have serious negative implications for peace and security, and the rights of women and girls. The enactment of national emergency powers, introduction of military checkpoints and lockdowns, closed borders, and restrictions on citizens' movement and speech, all mirror a governance context similar to that of a conflict setting. Across the region, leaders are using warlike terminology of “battling an invisible enemy” to describe efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19, furthering the conflict-like social dynamics.

Crisis and conflict have profound and disproportionate impacts on women and girls, amplifying pre-existing inequalities. In wartime, women and girls experience a lack of food and housing security, loss of livelihoods, a heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence, and an increased burden of unpaid care work. The challenges brought by COVID-19 threaten to replicate these vulnerabilities.

In Asia-Pacific, COVID-19 policy and legislative responses are being led predominantly by male decision-makers and political leaders. These

security-driven approaches largely fail to engage women in leadership and peacebuilding, which is vitally important to social, political and economic recovery. Women in the region are fierce actors for peace and preventers of conflict. In contexts including Nepal, Timor-Leste and Bougainville, women's leadership has been proven time and again to support peacebuilding and recovery. These lessons should be replicated in the recovery from COVID-19. Furthermore, COVID-19 has strong potential to act as a driver of conflict and to inflame discrimination against those perceived to be carrying the virus, and women must be supported to promote social cohesion in this time of social distancing.

Women play an essential role in peace and security activities, including in accelerating economic revitalization in the aftermath of conflict and in contributing to sustainable peace. This has been borne out by a range of evidence, and endorsed by the 2000 adoption of UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 1325 as the catalytic moment for the formation of the women, peace and security agenda. Now, 20 years after UNSCR 1325, applying the lens of women, peace and security to COVID-19 response provides valuable guidance on the fundamental need for women's rights and women's leadership to be at the forefront of recovery.

Key considerations

The militarization of COVID-19 as a “war against an invisible enemy,” and women’s human rights

In Asia and the Pacific, national authorities are responding to COVID-19 by using sweeping powers. As of 24 March, India has placed the entire country on lockdown; the Philippines and Malaysia are using the military to enforce movement control orders; and since 25 January, China has sent more than 10,000 military personnel into Hubei Province. In Singapore, anyone who has been in contact with known COVID-19 cases is under active surveillance by the military and contacted daily to monitor their health status. In Thailand, citizens are prohibited from publishing certain information under the state of emergency. These restrictions may have disproportionate impacts on women’s human rights, including the right of access to information and freedom of expression. Broad powers restricting freedom of movement have the potential to be applied beyond the response to COVID-19, including by restricting women human rights defenders’ ability to protest.

As the security sector is mobilized to enforce emergency measures across the region, women’s rights, safety and freedoms may be at risk. Checkpoints can include physical examinations. There is potential for human rights violations, including gender-based harassment, and extortion. Law enforcement in Asia and the Pacific is predominantly male, with the proportion of women in the police and military in Southeast Asia ranging from 6 percent in Indonesia to 22 percent in Lao PDR.¹ Not only does the enforcement of lockdowns by the security sector and surveillance have serious implications for women’s human rights; these are further amplified by the underrepresentation of women in military and policing. This lack of women in the security sector may mean the interactions women from communities are having with law enforcement officials are not sensitive to their needs and further expose them to harassment.

Women and COVID-19 in conflict, post-conflict and fragile settings

Women in conflict-affected settings ordinarily face heightened vulnerabilities, including to gender-based violence and human rights violations, which threaten to be increased by the outbreak of the pandemic. National health systems suffer profoundly in the context of war. Many who have been through conflict are now ill-equipped to respond to the demands of responding to the pandemic. In displaced persons and refugee settings, there are distinct challenges. In environments such as Cox’s Bazaar in Bangladesh and IDP camps in Rakhine State, Myanmar, crowded conditions and limited sanitation facilities inhibit the ability of women and girls to practice the hygiene and social distancing measures recommended to avoid spreading the virus behind COVID-19. In environments where the human rights of women and girls are already under threat, an outbreak of COVID-19, and the responses to it, could trigger a further backslide. In Afghanistan, women have long suffered exclusion from the peacebuilding arena and could be further marginalized from engagement in peace talks as national priorities shift focus and as barriers to their participation increase.

COVID-19 may also create additional constraints on conflict environments, including limitations on peacekeeping rotations, cessation of mediation and diplomatic efforts, and redirection of security-sector focus away from containing threats such as terrorism. These could have profound impacts on communities, leaving women and girls especially vulnerable to eruptions of violence and relapses of conflict.

At the same time, there are windows of opportunity for the current health crisis to enable peacebuilding and the resolution of pre-existing community conflicts. On 23 March, UN Secretary-General António Guterres issued a call for a global ceasefire. In the Asia-Pacific region, this call has already been heeded in the Philippines by the government and communist insurgent actors, placing the decades-long

conflict on hold and opening a window for diplomacy. In Afghanistan, the government has similarly called for a ceasefire. If women can be meaningfully included in these processes, the challenges of COVID-19 have the potential to be a catalytic moment for peace gains.

COVID-19 as a driver of conflict, and social cohesion in a time of social distancing

Emergency environments exacerbate gender inequalities, social tensions, and an us-versus-them mentality. Hate speech, fake news, discrimination and stigma are rampant as a result of the virus's quick spread. COVID-19 may become a driver of conflict, with devastating impacts on women and girls. In Sri Lanka which has had recent flares of ethnic and religious tensions, COVID-19 may fuel further eruptions of violence. In Myanmar, there is a risk that the pandemic will exacerbate ongoing conflict.

In countries including Indonesia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines, where women have been at the frontlines of promoting social cohesion in response to violent extremism, COVID-19 risks fracturing newly formed social bonds. Communities must support women's leadership to translate peacebuilding and the prevention of violent extremism principles to the context of COVID-19 to promote social cohesion.

Recommendations for all actors responding to COVID-19 in Asia-Pacific:

- 1. Women's full, equal and meaningful participation must be promoted in leadership and decision-making roles related to COVID-19 response and recovery, including in conflict-affected and fragile settings.**
- 2. Responses to COVID-19 driven by the security sector must be proportionate, gender-sensitive and protect women's human rights, including through women's leadership in law enforcement and the security sector.**
- 3. Women's civil society must be supported to monitor and document security-sector action, access to justice, and governance to promote transparency and accountability for women's human rights under national emergency conditions.**
- 4. Women must lead in social cohesion measures including countering discrimination and hate speech, and the prevention of COVID-19 becoming a driver of violence and conflict.**
- 5. Preparation for early recovery must be inclusive of women's socio-economic needs and priorities.**

¹ INTERPOL, UN Women and UNODC, "Women in Law Enforcement in the ASEAN Region". Forthcoming.

For more information, please visit:

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response>

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