Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts

Pandemic Response:
The Women, Peace and Security Agenda

By Tamara Nair

SYNOPSIS

In this time of compounding global crisis, the world needs to come together to not only fight the pandemic but to also preserve our commitments to certain shared beliefs. One of these is the eradication of gender inequality even in the midst of this humanitarian crisis.

COMMENTARY

UNDOUBTEDLY, COVID-19 has a disproportionate impact on people, especially as a result of their positions in society and decision-making processes as well as numerous intersectionalities that compound inequalities; that of genders, disabilities, ethnicities, socio-economic class, race and even age. In addition, how these play out in complex emergencies: COVID-19 spreading in refugee camps or communities having to deal with natural hazards and the spread of the virus. These scenarios should also be of great concern to leaders.

When it comes to differentiated impacts, UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325: The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, with its prevention, participation, protection and role in relief and recovery principles, provides an excellent framework for response strategy for COVID-19. This is certainly a good way to realise ASEAN's shared commitment to the agenda.

WPS Framework and Pandemic Response

There might be many who question the relevance of the WPS framework in a global pandemic. After all, the provenance of the agenda lies in the Bosnian war and the Rwandan genocide; both revealed the inadequacies of existing international peace and security systems to address emerging military and civilian transgressions against vulnerable groups, especially against women and girls.

At the same time, the recognition of climate-induced struggles, the occurrence of devastating epidemics and the largest mass exodus of people, among other 'non-traditional threats' were looming beyond the horizon.

The WPS framework is a transformative one. It hopes for change and as I have suggested elsewhere, the agenda can in fact be used to address the plight of women in the aftermath of [natural hazards](#) and in issues of [women's economic insecurities](#) as well. UNSCR 1325 did not conceptualise the WPS agenda with these specific details and the contents of the resolution do not articulate particular events.

Despite this, UNSCR 1325 speaks of a people-centric approach and a gendered understanding of human security, creating a shift in thinking and framing contemporary global security issues that lead to inclusive response strategies. What UNSCR 1325 outlines then, is of extreme relevance to response to COVID-19.

WPS in Southeast Asia

ASEAN already has a strong commitment towards the Women, Peace and Security agenda as outlined in its joint statement in 2017 on promoting women, peace and security in the region. Key in this statement is the "pledge to promote gender equality and reduce social inequalities between men and women in our societies as a way to contribute to longstanding peace and prosperity" and to protect women from "…discrimination and social exclusion."

This will require governments, donors, NGOs and civil societies to work together to reaffirm the region's commitments to the WPS agenda and gender equality and how these commitments can not only be sustained but be brought to the fore in this time.

ASEAN has already taken the right step in establishing, under the aegis of the ASEAN Institute of Peace and Reconciliation, the ASEAN Women for Peace Registry. This studies the WPS agenda in the region among other areas. The registry has representatives from all ASEAN member states.

But more can be done. All regional commitments on gender equality and women's and girls' rights should be upheld during COVID-19 as well. The principles of the ASEAN's WPS agenda and other international gender equality standards must fully apply during this pandemic.

How can the WPS Agenda Help?

The question remains as to how the WPS agenda might be operationalised during COVID-19. How can the four pillars of prevention, participation, protection and the role of women in relief and recovery form a framework for pandemic response for member states in ASEAN or form the backbone for a future regional pandemic response?

The answers to these questions lie in how much we listen to and discuss what ground-up evidence-based research tells us about the disproportionate impacts any kind of global crises has on women, be it climate, food, financial or in current times, health crises. How much legitimate space is dedicated to these conversations?

Women are affected in a number of ways in these times under COVID-19: from reduced incomes or no incomes, limited movement and healthcare as migrant workers, limited acknowledgment of their value and service as cleaners, canteen operators and even pre-school teachers to carers in homes as well as nurses in hospitals.

Men in these jobs are affected as well but much of these jobs in this region, and in fact around the world, are mostly done by women. The majority of food stall owners, carers, cleaners, teachers and frontline healthcare workers around the world are women. Women also form the bulk of informal labour; such work has almost disappeared in this pandemic with lockdowns and closures globally. This has resulted in placing several, especially women, in dire financial situations.

Operationalising the Four Pillars of WPS

The operationalising of the four pillars of the WPS agenda: prevention of suffering for women; participation of women in planning and implementation of policies; protection of women from economic, psychological or physical violence; and the sustained role of women in relief and recovery processes; integrated within response strategies now can address the gender impacts of COVID-19 that creates disparate levels of suffering between men and women. But how can this happen?

There should be more regional conversations happening around how the WPS agenda can help in responding to COVID-19 if we are intent on creating an inclusive response strategy to fight this disease. One such opportunity is being presented by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

The webinar: COVID-19 and its impacts on the Women of Southeast Asia, hosted by the school, aims to bring together a panel of experts from the region to discuss how the WPS agenda can assist in response strategies for member states during COVID-19. It will also highlight how such an approach might place ASEAN in a unique leadership position in having adopted this strategy.

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