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Women, Peace and Security: Impact of UNSCR 1325 On Indo-Pacific

By Vishalini Chandara Sagar

Synopsis

On the 15th anniversary of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, how far have countries in the Indo-Pacific region come to implement its peace and security agenda?

Commentary

THE UNITED Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 adopted on 31 October 2000, is the first UN decision to recognise that conflicts impact women and girls differently from men and boys. It also acknowledges the strong relationship between peace and women's role in decision-making and the active role women play throughout the conflict cycle.

It has paved the way for women to be treated as capable decision-makers in conflict situations and active supporters of sustainable peace and security. China and Malaysia were two countries in the Indo-Pacific region that supported the UNSCR 1325 as UN Security Council (UNSC) members.

Humanitarian crises in the Indo-Pacific region

It is evident that the far-flung Indo-Pacific region has been among the most prone to humanitarian crises in the past 15 years. It was the second most violent region in the world last year, with ethnic and religious clashes in South and Southeast Asia. These ranged from ethno-religious clashes in Pakistan, Nepal and Myanmar, to separatist conflict in southern Thailand, Philippines and Indonesia.

Most of them have endured over time. Since early 2014, thousands of Rohingya

Muslims have fled Myanmar, mainly by sea seeking refuge in neighbouring countries, causing a regional 'boat crisis'.

Geographically, the region is also one of the most vulnerable zones to natural disasters. According to the 2014 World Risk Report, 10 out of the 15 countries who are at most risk to natural disasters are located in the Indo-Pacific region. It also accounts for over 90% of all global deaths from extreme weather events. In addition, Indo-Pacific makes up almost 50% of world's total damage due to disasters and climate change.

Impact of humanitarian crises on women

Though humanitarian crises cause widespread often unavoidable destruction, it did not impact everyone equally. Marginalised populations, including women, are frequently among the most affected in crises, especially when they are poor. Some examples of crises that have a disproportionate effect on women are, terrorism, civil unrest, war and natural disasters. Research has shown that females often lose their shelter and face a reduction in economic opportunities in the aftermath of a disaster.

Plan International's 2013 report found that females are less likely to be rescued or fed in a disaster situation than their male counterparts. They are also more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and trauma.

A study conducted by the London School of Economics indicates that women are 14 times more likely to die or be wounded in a disaster than men. For instance, an estimated 45,000 more women than men died during the 2004 Asian Tsunami; 61% of the people who died during Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar were women; in the 2009 Samoa Tsunami, 70% of the adults that died from tropical cyclones in Samoa and Tonga were females.

Nonetheless, as in similar situations across the world, when their circumstances are put forward, women are often depicted as passive victims. Minimal emphasis is placed on their active and potential role in conflict management and fostering sustainable peace and security. However, the high frequency of humanitarian crises in the region stresses the importance of women's role in prevention, protection, participation, and peace-building and recovery into the Humanitarian Assistance Disaster Response agenda of the region.

Region at work

In 2010, ASEAN established the Commission for the Promotion of Women and Children's Rights to promote and assist ASEAN member states in their implementation of internationally recognised women's and children's rights, especially in disaster settings. ASEAN has also acknowledged that females are instrumental to overcoming challenges posed by complex humanitarian crises.

In line with that, ASEAN has attempted to address the unique needs of women and girls by involving and engaging them in the decision-making processes. For example, the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) and its Work Programme recognises the unique needs and

potential contributions of women and children, in the process of disaster risk reduction, response, and recovery.

The region has also hosted workshops which addressed the varying levels of women's participation in peace processes and conflict resolution in the region and raised awareness on UNSCR 1325 and existing National Action Plans (NAPs) on WPS. Currently only six countries (Philippines, Nepal, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, Republic of Korea and Japan) in the region have a NAP.

These workshops provided an opportunity for regional dialogue on the relevance of the WPS agenda and highlighted existing best practices concerning the prevention of violence against women in conflict and humanitarian situations at the local, national and regional levels. In July 2015, the RSIS Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies hosted a roundtable on the challenges to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in the Asia-Pacific in collaboration with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in which sessions were dedicated to SGBV in natural disaster and conflict settings.

Future of UNSCR 1325 in Indo-Pacific region

Being the world's most disaster-prone region and with many ongoing complex humanitarian emergencies, the Indo-Pacific has a key responsibility in spearheading the empowering of women in crisis situations.

While there has been progress in the region in implementing UNSCR 1325, the focus of the execution strategy needs to be shifted from raising awareness and education to implementing specific guidelines and initiatives that enables women's active involvement in peacebuilding efforts. Various platforms to engage women and girls in crisis situations already exist in many governments and civil society organisations in the region.

Training women to hold leadership positions in organisations involved in peacebuilding, establishing and supporting village-based groups for women to learn about their rights and gain access to essential information and getting local man on board to promote the WPS agenda in their communities are significant steps to progress the WPS agenda in the region.

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