

Sexual and Gender-based violence

On 19 June, the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, the UN Secretary General released a message stating that “this despicable crime persists despite international commitments to stamp it out.”¹ In addition to committing to redoubling efforts to prevent atrocities and ensure accountability, the SG mentioned the importance of incorporating international humanitarian law into domestic legislation and training for security forces. This year emphasis was given to ‘technology and the digital divide’, pointing out positive effects of technology in helping people access support, while acknowledging the harms of sexual harassment and gender-based hate speech. The UN specifically states that “disturbing trends of gender-based hate speech and incitement to violence [have] fuelled conflict in which rape and other forms of sexual violence are used to humiliate and destabilize targeted communities.”² Tackling this problem is an important part of gender-based atrocity prevention.

According to scholars Sara E. Davies and Jacqui True, conflict situations escalating over 2022-23 appear to have gender oppression as a “normative underpinning”, and the gender norms that “permit, legitimate and incentivise this violence are the consistent structural conditions always present.”³ They point to a number of recent examples, including Myanmar, where sexual violence continues to be used systematically by the military to target particular communities and intimidate opposition. Indeed, during the UN Security Council annual open debate on CRSV, a human rights defender with the Women’s League of Burma reiterated the well-documented fact that sexual violence is the Tatmadaw’s “modus operandi”.⁴ Having collected more than 100 reports of CRSV since the coup, many of those associated with the WLB have had arrest warrants issued against them, and have either fled or are in hiding.⁵

High rates of domestic violence and gender inequality are a risk factor for gender-based atrocities. A July 2023 study⁶ has found that women in Cambodia and Vietnam experienced increasing and relatively high levels of sexual violence while physical violence declined, with Timor-Leste having the highest prevalence of physical partner violence among countries studied. Consistent decreases of violence were recorded in the Philippines.

Similarly, gender-based violence remains rife in the Pacific. Papua New Guinea, for instance, continues to experience kidnappings and massacres that target women and children, and sorcery-accusation related violence that often involves torture and murder.⁷

In July 2023, Fiji’s Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection, Lynda Tabuya launched a whole of government National Action Plan to prevent violence against women 2023-2028. An initial commitment has been made of \$1 million from the Fiji Government and \$6 million from Australia, and Fiji is the first Pacific Island country to develop such a plan.⁸

The future agenda of the Melanesian Spearhead Group will incorporate gender equality and prevention of gender-based violence as a priority. It is important to apply a gender lens to identified areas of concern, including security, trafficking, and climate change.

The nexus between violence against women and climate change is becoming clearer. An international study has found that gender-based violence may increase by 4.5% for every 1 °C increase in the annual mean temperature. Using data from India, Pakistan and Nepal, the report links temperature increases with the prevalence of intimate partner violence. For Pacific Island states, who are at the forefront of climate change, it will be crucial to incorporate gendered considerations in any preventive or responsive strategies.

Recommendations

The Myanmar military should:

1. Immediately cease the practice of using sexual and gender-based violence as a form of torture against detainees, and as a tactic of persecution against women activists, and those from ethnic and religious minorities;
2. Develop a code of conduct that explicitly prohibits the use of SGBV by the security sector, supported by accountability processes.

The UN and ASEAN should:

1. In line with the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security, and the Five-Point Consensus, take urgent and serious action on the situation in Myanmar to protect women from the high risk of sexual and gender-based violence, and hold perpetrators accountable;
2. Continue to support programs in the Asia Pacific to reduce violence against women and promote gender equality;
3. Continue to platform Burmese human rights defenders in UN forums and support the work of civil society organisations in Myanmar, including by ensuring the safety of members and staff.

The Melanesian Spearhead Group should:

1. Develop and implement a policy agenda to improve gender equality in the region, to reduce gender-based violence, and to better highlight the particular effects of issues such as climate change on women.

¹ Secretary-General's message, 19 June 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/observances/end-sexual-violence-in-conflict-day/messages>

² International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, 19 June 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/observances/end-sexual-violence-in-conflict-day>

³ Sara Davies and Jacqui True, The Persistence of Sexual Violence in Conflict: Ending the Zero-Sum Approach, 19 June 2023, Australian Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-persistence-of-sexual-violence-in-conflict-ending-the-zero-sum-approach/>

⁴ Rebecca Ratcliffe, Sexual violence is junta's 'modus operandi', Myanmar activist tells UN, The Guardian, 15 July 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/jul/14/myanmar-sexual-violence-junta-modus-operandi-naw-hser-hser-tells-un>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Seema Vyas, Henrica A.F.M Jansen, Jessica Gardner, Sujata Tuladhar, Kate Hammond & Kristin Diemer, An analysis of changes in the prevalence and patterns of intimate partner violence against women in seven Asian countries, BMC Women's Health, 31 July 2023, <https://bmcwomenshealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12905-023-02534-6>

⁷ Tim Swanston and Theckla Gunga, The PNG gang that kidnapped an Australian professor is allegedly unleashing new horrors on girls and women, ABC News, 29 June 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-29/png-gang-that-kidnapped-aussie-unleashes-new-horrors/102495750>; Sarah Kanowski, Dan Smith and Meggie Morris, When Ruth Kissam buried the

body of a woman accused of sorcery in PNG, it changed her life, ABC Pacific, 7 July 2023,

<https://www.abc.net.au/pacific/stopping-sorcery-related-violence-in-png/102555722>

⁸ Mosese Raqio, Ministry of Women launches National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls, Fiji Village, 2 June 2023 <https://www.fijivillage.com/news/Ministry-of-Women-launches-National-Action-Plan-to-Prevent-Violence-Against-Women-and-Girls-8fx5r4/>