

Sexual and Gender-based violence

On 25 October 2023, the UN Security Council held its annual Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). In the lead up, UN Women said that over 600 million women and girls live in conflict-affected countries, up 50% since 2017,¹ while the report of the Secretary General on WPS noted that despite previous commitments, barriers remain to women's participation in peacebuilding.² The report made the connection between authoritarianism and misogyny, and noted the impact of conflict, Covid-19 and climate change on women and girls. Despite widespread sexual violence and setbacks to women's rights, from Darfur to Afghanistan and beyond, the Secretary General said that hope for a radical change in direction is possible if governments and international organisations follow the lead of the women's rights movement. Of the 2020 goals for WPS, the major priority for the UN is women's full, equal and meaningful participation, which should be facilitated by setting and monitoring measurable targets. The ASEAN Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security will be an important tool for implementing strategies to improve women's participation in Asia.

The Secretary General reiterated concerns about attacks against women human rights defenders, and online gender-based violence against women in leadership positions. In relation to Asia, the report said that no women were represented in the delegations for the negotiation or review of the ASEAN five-point consensus on Myanmar, and encouraged investment in local mediation, noting that in Myanmar, women in Yangon, Rakhine State and elsewhere "have played a critical role in promoting social cohesion among women from different ethnic and religious communities".³

Alongside the Secretary General's report, UN Women Myanmar has said that "The multiple crises in Myanmar have increased the pre-existing inequalities, marginalization and vulnerabilities of women and girls,"⁴ and echoed the SG's calls for increased funding and other support to women's organisations. An earlier report from UN Women said that landmines planted after the 2021 coup are causing civilian casualties and women are avoiding agricultural work in fields littered with landmines. They are also at risk of sexual violence in rural areas.⁵ A survey of 2200 women in Myanmar found that half were afraid to leave their own neighbourhoods. Yet, domestic violence is also increasing, making women unsafe in their own homes.⁶

In the Pacific, gender equality and violence against women remain key concerns. In PNG, the already epidemic rates of GBV have been increasing according to a report by the Committee on Gender in October. The report also highlights the impact of tribal violence on women and girls, and the problem of sorcery accusation related violence.⁷ Exclusion from political processes and broader discrimination against women contribute to the risk of violence against women in PNG and also in other Pacific states such as Solomon Islands.⁸

Recommendations

The UN and ASEAN should:

- 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.
- Continue to platform Burmese human rights defenders in UN forums and fund and support the work of civil society organisations in Myanmar, including by ensuring the safety of members and staff.

Pacific regional organisations should:

- Update the Pacific National Action Plan on WPS and continue to support programs that aim towards gender equality and reduced violence against women.

¹ In-focus: The women, peace, and security debate, UNWomen, 24 October 2023,

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/in-focus/2023/10/in-focus-the-women-peace-and-security-debate>

² Report of the Secretary-General on Women and Peace and Security, 28 September 2023, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/279/08/PDF/N2327908.pdf?OpenElement>

³ Ibid

⁴ A guide to UN Security Resolution 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security agenda in Myanmar, 31 October 2023, <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2023/10/the-women-peace-and-security-agenda-in-myanmar>

⁵ Women's organizations remain at the front line of the crisis response in Myanmar, 16 August 2023, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2023/08/womens-organizations-remain-at-the-front-line-of-the-crisis-response-in-myanmar>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Parliamentary Committee on Gender Equality & Women's Empowerment, Inquiry into Gender Equality Policies & Institutions, Gender-Based Violence and Sorcery Accusation Related Violence Report to Parliament No.1, October 2023, https://www.unitedforequalitypng.com/_files/ugd/7f0c06_5432484f7cf144d98f1481af4caf3995.pdf?index=true

⁸ Heather Wrathall and Elizabeth Kopel, Women, Peace, and Security in the Pacific, The Diplomat, 1 September 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/women-peace-and-security-in-the-pacific/>