

Sexual and Gender-based violence

The ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security was launched in December 2022 in Cambodia, following its adoption at the ASEAN summits in November. Framed with the four pillars of the WPS agenda, Regional Director of UN Women Asia called it a “starting point to mainstream WPS into peace and security decision-making in the region, including peacekeeping operations and increasing non-traditional security threats that risk undermining peace and security of this region.”¹ The regional plan has a related website, Empowering Women for Sustainable Peace, which contains a ‘knowledge hub’, director of civil society organisations, and news updates on local initiatives.² Also recently released is the “Youth Guide to End Online Gender-Based Violence” which recognises the gendered aspects of online hate speech and was developed by the 30 for 2030 Network, a youth group in Asia Pacific.

In Fiji, following the election in December 2022, the new Minister for Women has announced work to advance the five-year National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls which will include programs to promote respectful relationships, gender equality strategies, school programs and media initiatives, and policies for women’s economic empowerment.³

Gendered perspectives continue to become more integrated into policy relating to peacebuilding, atrocity prevention and similar areas. For example, more research is looking into the gendered impacts of climate change, and finding that women are affected disproportionately and in distinct ways. A December 2022 report, Gender Equality and Climate Change, has found “compounding factors lead women and girls in Asia and the Pacific to experience the greatest impacts of climate change, which – in turn - amplifies existing gender inequalities and poses unique threats to their livelihoods, health, and safety.”⁴ Given that climate change is a ‘threat multiplier’ for atrocity crime risk, and that there are clear connections between gender equality and the risk of atrocities, this is an important aspect of research for atrocity prevention.

In Australia, a new Centre of Excellence for the Elimination of Violence Against Women has been established and will “pioneer new, evidence-based approaches to radically improve policy and practice across Australia and the Indo-Pacific.”⁵ There is a need for more research on the structural drivers of violence against women in the region, particularly given that there are nine countries in the Asia Pacific where more than half of women have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetimes.⁶ A 2022 regional snapshot from the kNOwVAWdata project has tracked women’s experiences of IPV between 2000 and 2022 found that the highest proportion of women who have experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner was in Fiji and Solomon Islands, with 64%. Papua New Guinea recorded 48% of women who have experienced IPV in the past 12 months.⁷

1 February marked the second anniversary of the Myanmar coup. Women’s Peace Network’s statement referred to the range of human rights violations and atrocities that continue to take place, including arbitrary arrests, killing, torture and sexual violence. It also noted increasing risk for the Rohingya population, stating “over the past two years, the junta has issued and reissued policies and restrictions to arrest and detain at least 2700 Rohingya, including over 800 women.”⁸

In addition to physical violence, thousands of Burmese women who are seen to be “politically active” have been abused and harassed online by supporters of the military. Some have had sex videos released or been doxxed, in order to silence and shame them. This type of online intimidation and attack is a form of gender-based violence: “...when women are doxxed, the attacks frequently feature sexist hate speech, often coupled with explicit sexual imagery and video footage ...”⁹

Recommendations

The Myanmar military should:

- 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;
- Take action to stop widespread attacks against women online.

The UN and regional bodies particularly ASEAN should:

- 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;
- Support research on online gender violence and hate speech;
- Continue to support programs in the Asia Pacific to reduce violence against women and promote gender equality.

¹ ASEAN launches plan to promote women's security in Southeast Asia, UN Women, 5 December 2022, <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/stories/press-release/2022/12/asean-rpa-wps-launch>

² <https://wps.asean.org/>

³ Elena Vucukula, Work on for five-year plan to curb violence, Fiji Times, 2 February 2023, <https://www.fijitimes.com/work-on-for-five-year-plan-to-curb-violence/>

⁴ UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Gender Equality and Climate Change, December 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/gender-equality-and-climate-change>

⁵ Monash University, \$35 million for Centre of Excellence to help eliminate violence against women, 9 November 2022, [https://www.monash.edu/arts/news-and-events/articles/\\$35-million-for-centre-of-excellence-to-help-eliminate-violence-against-women](https://www.monash.edu/arts/news-and-events/articles/$35-million-for-centre-of-excellence-to-help-eliminate-violence-against-women)

⁶ Jess Letch and Kristin Diemer, On the frontline of family violence in the Asia Pacific, Pursuit, University of Melbourne, <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/on-the-frontline-of-family-violence-in-the-asia-pacific>

⁷ kNOwVAWdata 2022 Regional Snapshot, https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/knowvawdata_regional_vaw_map_september_6_2022.pdf

⁸ https://mcusercontent.com/6819ae24e30bd9a9db0322d69/files/67e5cc10-4e44-e063-3950-65ebc07846a3/2_1_Statement_for_two_year_anniversary.pdf

⁹ Pallabi Munsu, They released a sex video to shame and silence her. She's one of many women in Myanmar doxxed and abused on Telegram by supporters of the military, CNN, 7 February 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/07/asia/myanmar-military-sexual-images-doxxing-telegram-as-equals-intl-cmd/index.html>