

Toward a Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security in Asia

By Jane Sloane

On a recent trip to Myanmar, I met with a former parliamentarian from Yangon to discuss women's political participation in the country. When she served from 2010 to 2015, women members of Parliament constituted 5.9 percent of all elected MPs in the Union Parliament, the lowest in Asia.

The 2015 general elections have changed that situation dramatically, with a significant increase both in the number of women who contested seats and the number of women who were ultimately elected to office.

While this is a positive step, at 14.5 percent, the number of women in parliament still hovers below the global average of 22 percent. Our meeting also reminded me of the realities that women in politics face across Asia. Despite holding a seat, the parliamentarian told me that in Myanmar "women are often pressured not to speak in Parliament. ... Political parties track how often women speak to media and monitor their social media. Women are increasingly conscious of the gender divide." Beyond just getting elected, women need to be better supported in political office to ensure that they have a larger role in decision-making and that their voices are heard.

Despite progress, women remain under-represented not just in political bodies, but in forums designed to advance peace and security across the region. Regional action to advance women's opportunities and gender equality is vital, as many of the issues that impact women have regional dimensions. This includes issues such as irregular migration, the limited participation of women-owned businesses in regional trade, and climate resilience. It's also important for men to be included in these agendas, as stakeholders and as beneficiaries, in support of their own expanded opportunities for rigid gender roles and responsibilities to be relaxed.

There is increasing international agreement that advancing women's participation, leadership, and opportunities in all areas of society, not just in politics, strengthens national economies and societies. Research also shows that women's participation can play a critical role in ensuring peace in security. As noted at a recent Council on Foreign Relations symposium on the topic, when women participate in peace processes, the resulting agreement is 35 percent more likely to last at least 15 years, while the participation of civil society groups, including women's

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organizations, makes a peace agreement 64 percent less likely to fail. Higher levels of gender equality are also associated with a lower propensity for conflict.

One of the ways of increasing women's dynamic role in shaping peace agreements, laws to address gender-based violence, and countering violent extremism in Asia is by gaining a commitment to a regional action plan on women, peace, and security. The United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) calls for ensuring women's participation at all levels of decision-making on peace and security.

This includes incorporating a gender perspective into conflict prevention initiatives, protecting the rights of women and girls, and ensuring that their needs and concerns are integrated into relief and recovery efforts. To date, 64 countries have developed National Action Plans (NAP) on WPS, including nine in the Asia-Pacific region. These NAPs outline priorities, approaches, and financing for national implementation of UNSCR 1325. The NAPs, along with seven subsequent WPS resolutions and other international rights frameworks, have succeeded in increasing attention to women and girls' experiences in fragile and conflict-affected countries, and have contributed to an improved enabling environment for women's engagement in peace processes.

In October 2015, UN member states renewed their commitment to UNSCR 1325 by unanimously adopting Resolution 2242, which recognizes the changing global context of peace and security, and the gender dimensions in relation to violent extremism, mass migration, and climate change. These challenging and interrelated issues often impact the lives of women and girls differently as well as affecting prospects for peace and security in Asia. Conflicts in the region, together with resource scarcity and degradation and climate-induced disasters, have a mutually reinforcing impact.

Despite international consensus around the WPS agenda, much remains to be done in Asia at both national and regional levels to realize the promise of the WPS mandate. This includes expanding effective approaches to advancing women's meaningful participation in security and peacebuilding. It also means transforming the institutions and societies that constrain their roles, and the gender-related factors that contribute to violent extremism, mass migration, displacement, and climate change. The WPS agenda also includes increased work on gender integration and mainstreaming within the security sector, which in general remains male-dominated and not inclusive of women.

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ASEAN as an institution, and its member nations, have numerous levers at their disposal to reduce these structural barriers, drawing on success stories in the region, to agree upon regional approaches to advance women's opportunities and gender equality. ASEAN also has a long-standing commitment to empowering women and promoting gender equality, as evidenced by such landmark commitments as the Declaration of the Advancement of Women in the ASEAN Region in 1988 and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women in the ASEAN Region in 2004.

The ASEAN Committee on Women's 2016-2020 action plan identifies several critical areas including enhancing women's leadership, changing social norms, ending violence against women, and building women's economic empowerment as key to ensuring that women can play equal and dynamic roles in building and shaping their societies. These frameworks need to be linked to measurable actions to ensure that laws and policies are effectively implemented.

The Asia Foundation, together with the U.S. Department of State and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), recently convened a gathering of prominent scholars, government officials, and private sector actors for the "U.S.-ASEAN Conference on Legal Issues of Regional Importance" in Singapore. Included in the conference outcomes was a recommendation that an ASEAN Women's Conference be staged in Singapore in 2018 to provide a dedicated forum for dialogue and action on women's empowerment and the women, peace, and security agenda in Asia. Further, that there be a commitment to a Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security, leveraging the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence Against Women as an important touchstone document and commitment for the region.

There is a tremendous opportunity for ASEAN member states to consider a regional platform within ASEAN to implement and advance the women, peace, and security agenda, thus placing ASEAN as a global leader on these issues. The time is now.