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Two Years On: The Need for Gender-Sensitivity in Humanitarian Protection

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SYNOPSIS

Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been unimaginable suffering caused by the potent combination of a public health crisis, economic downturns and increases in social tension, particularly for women. To mitigate these impacts and protect women, gender-sensitive policies and programmes such as increased representation of women at decision-making levels and increased collection of gender disaggregated data in a disaster context are needed.

COMMENTARY

Two years ago, on 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a pandemic. One of the most disaster-prone regions in the world to begin with, the Asia-Pacific region has been battered since the pandemic struck. In particular, these past two years have been devastating for women. Already disproportionately affected by crisis or emergency situations, whether in conflicts or during natural hazards, they also have borne the heavier burden of the pandemic.

According to the World Economic Forum's latest Global Gender Gap Report, the timeframe to close the global gender gap has now increased from 99.5 years in 2020 to 135.6 years in 2021 with the socio-economic fallout from COVID-19. In East Asia and the Pacific, it will take longer, at 165.1 years. By prioritising the leadership and engagement of women and girls, policymakers can ensure that the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on women and girls are mitigated as much as possible, which is especially vital in ensuring a more robust response in recovery and in future shocks.

Natural disasters are increasingly commonplace in the Asia Pacific, and more gender-sensitive policies, focusing on the needs of women, are necessary.
Image by Saikiran Kesari on Unsplash.

Currrent Landscape — As Seen From a Gender Lens

Women and girls were already starting from a point of vulnerability prior to the pandemic, due to existing power dynamics and unequal access to social, political, and economic resources. There is therefore a clear need for gender-sensitive strategies and measures, policies that specifically consider the lived experiences of women and their needs and priorities on the journey to gender parity in the disaster context.

In the ASEAN countries, gender equality in humanitarian settings has been a significant topic of discussion over the past few years since the adoption of the "Joint Statement on Promoting Women, Peace and Security" in 2017. Regional thinking has shifted to acknowledge the agency of women as active participants, leaders and "agents of change" in disaster management, as noted in the recently launched ASEAN Regional Framework on Protection, Gender and Inclusion in Disaster Management 2021–2025. For stakeholders in the region to implement this vision, there should first be a focus on integrating women into decision-making and ensuring that disaggregated data is available for evidence-based decision-making.

Representation at Decision-Making Levels

Gender-sensitive policies specifically addressing the experiences of women are vital to mitigate the disproportionate impacts of crises on women. However, according to the UN's Global Gender Response Tracker, less than one-third of global COVID-19 policies and measures are gender-sensitive. This is probably due — at least in part —

to the underrepresentation of women in decision-making arenas. In fact, with women making up the majority or half of the members in only 18% of government COVID-19 taskforces, this is likely to translate to a significant gap in the knowledge of the probable impacts of these policies for women on the ground.

In Southeast Asia, militaries tend to be heavily involved in state response during times of disasters. Similarly, most countries in the region have also militarised their pandemic responses, particularly in the form of heightened border control measures and the enforcement of curfews. This militarisation has been particularly challenging for women and girls, considering the well-established link between the presence of security personnel and a heightened vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence. This pattern has unfortunately been repeated during COVID-19 — as indicated by reports of sexual harassment by security personnel at COVID-19 checkpoints — and is probably due to the significant underrepresentation of women in the security sector in the region.

To address this gender imbalance in the security sector and reduce such occurrences in the short to medium terms, governments should actively recruit women for the security sector. While it may not be feasible for states in the region to rely solely on their limited civilian capacity during disasters now, governments should also commit to building up civilian disaster management capacity, thus improving their institutional response in the long run.

Gender-disaggregated Data for Gender-sensitive Policies

The second targeted policy area to address is data collection. Sustained efforts must be made to ensure that data collected is gender-disaggregated. Ensuring that data collected in a specific context can be further broken down with gender as a variable will allow for the analysis of gender differences in the economic, political and social dimensions. This will, in turn, provide the evidence for the crafting of gender-sensitive policies, as has been highlighted in the ASEAN Gender Outlook. While ASEAN member states have made substantial progress — with all countries other than Brunei and Singapore above the global average for gender-specific data availability, more needs to be done; insufficient gender-disaggregated data collection hinders evidence-based policy-making.

There are specific provisions in the Implementation Plan of the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework to inform policy for addressing this data gap. Countries in the region must translate this framework into national policy across government, including in the security sectors. Addressing the policy deficiencies in this respect will require concerted effort on the part of government leaders across the region.

With the anticipated increase in the frequency and intensity of natural hazards and the impacts of extreme heat and sea-level rise, better data collection is imperative. These occurrences also call for the need to address the vulnerabilities of women and girls. Importantly, better data collection will in turn better inform effective policy-making by reaching all sections of affected populations — all the more imperative in this disaster-prone region.

COVID-19 has revealed the cracks in societies, providing a clear look at systemic deficiencies and a wake-up call to leave no one behind. While the upheavals still being wrought by the pandemic are a tragic reality, they should also be regarded as a window of opportunity for improvement in the protection of women and girls in the region. Gender-sensitive policies will be a necessary condition to mitigate the disproportionate impacts of this pandemic and other future shocks.

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