



Key Findings

Managing Crisis on Multiple Fronts: Southeast Asian Women's Leadership During COVID-19

Monday, Sept. 13 | 4:30pm Hawaii / 7:30pm US West Coast / 10:30pm US East Coast
Tuesday, Sept. 14 | 9:00 am (Yangon) | 10:30am (Manila) | 11:30am (Dili) | 12:30pm (Canberra)

Pacific Forum, in partnership with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, hosted a Women, Peace and Security (WPS) webinar which explored unique challenges faced by women in Southeast Asia who are at the frontlines of advancing peace and stability in the region during multiple forms of crisis - from COVID-19 to conflicts, and climate change. The webinar featured four panelists namely:

- Dr. Miemie Winn Byrd, Professor, Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS), Honolulu, Hawaii, USA
- Ms. Fatima Pir Tillah Allian, Program Manager, Nisa Ul Haqq fi Bangsamoro (Women for Justice in the Bangsamoro), Philippines
- Ms. Carmeneza dos Santos Monteiro, Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion, Timor-Leste
- Dr. Melissa Johnston, Lecturer in Political Science, University of Melbourne, Australia

The Q&A and discussion was moderated by Dr. Maria Tanyag, Lecturer in International Relations at the Australian National University and Resident Women, Peace and Security Fellow at Pacific Forum. In total, there were 62 individuals registered for the event representing different sectors from the academe, government, business and military.

The key findings from this webinar are described below.

1. Multiple crises mean diversity and plurality in women's leadership roles

Across Southeast Asia, different groups of women are facing 'triple' or multiple crises posed by violent conflicts, the COVID-19 pandemic, and impacts of climate change. The speakers reported different ways in which women have stepped in to help mitigate the consequences of these crises to ensure survival of their families and communities. Women's leadership is present for example in resistance movements, post-disaster reconstruction, the informal economy, peacebuilding and pandemic response. Across Myanmar, the Philippines and Timor-Leste, women are reported to have localised or indigenous mechanisms and practices for crisis response, conflict mediation and peacebuilding. However, women's leadership and agency during times of crisis remains undervalued, unrecognised and poorly understood by the broader public. There are prevalent assumptions and prejudices that women do not have leadership qualities despite them being in the frontlines of virtually all areas of crisis response. This is compounded by women's own poor self-image or lack of recognition that their own actions count as leadership due to harmful cultural beliefs. It was also noted that crises are often associated with patriarchal push-backs that deny women from broader decision-making spaces by relegating them to the household. This occurs as

multiple crises intensify the burdens of care and domestic work which women are expected to meet. Women are thus prevented from meaningful political participation because they lack the time and energy to do go beyond the household. It is important to document and tell stories of women's varied forms of leadership and expertise to ensure these are not forgotten and erased in peace time.

2. Addressing emerging overlapping insecurities is important to leverage crisis as opportunity for gender equality

The nexus of *COVID-conflict-climate change* in Southeast Asia underscores the need to pay attention to cascading and interrelated gendered impacts. Solutions must attend to multidimensional aspects of women's security. In the region, emerging evidence indicate that women are disproportionately bearing immediate harms caused by significant economic losses, a rise in domestic violence, and authoritarian lockdown measures within their countries. In addition, women will also disproportionately bear the long-term impacts of multiple crises as care needs will likely continue to intensify due to pandemic-induced mental health concerns, a rise in household debt and impoverishment, ongoing negative coping mechanisms such as the practice of female circumcision to increase the "value" or "acceptability" of women, and resource shortages due to stretched-out national relief assistance. There is also evidence that the rise in domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic might lead to long-term trauma and economic grievances that are risk factors for armed conflicts.

3. Regional and international community must ensure resources to support local women's crisis and long-term leadership

The speakers pointed out how especially in Southeast Asia patriarchal structures appear unshakeable despite multiple crises. The prevalence of male-dominated institutions and militarized crisis response in Southeast Asia provide what is perhaps a discouraging image for gender equality during and after crises. Crises can provide windows of opportunity for promoting women's crisis and long-term leadership if the regional and international community can work together in radical solidarity to champion local women's efforts at resisting and transforming the patriarchal structures that define their lives. Across the three country case studies explored in the webinar, recommendations focused on the following: 1) Aid programming and humanitarian assistance must progressively ensure that the language used and priorities match the lived realities of the most remote and marginalized groups of women in Southeast Asia; 2) Resources must reach the most vulnerable and in ways that enhance their own financial agency, ensure local accountability, and community awareness and expertise; and 3) Support for women must be ongoing and responsive to their multidimensional security needs.

4. Conclusions

In summary, the webinar presented the myriad challenges and lessons from the experiences of women in Southeast Asia as they manage crises on multiple fronts. Women from the region are diverse both in terms of their experiences of crisis and their modalities for leadership. Yet, all share similar experiences of routinized insecurities especially from their own governments. Southeast Asian women are able to thrive and persist within arguably the most prohibitive of conditions. Crucial lessons can be extrapolated from their experiences for promoting women's leadership globally.

This document was prepared by Dr. Maria Tanyag. For more information, please contact Dr. Crystal Pryor (crystal@pacforum.org). These preliminary findings provide a general summary of the discussion. This is not a consensus document. The views expressed are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect the views of all participants. The speakers have approved this summation of their presentation. This event was funded [in part] by the United States Department of Defense. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the author[s] and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of Defense.