

GENDER PERSPECTIVES ON ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

VIEWS FROM SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

WORKSHOP REPORT



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UNITED NATIONS INSTITUTE
FOR DISARMAMENT RESEARCH

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Support from UNIDIR core funders provides the foundation for all of the Institute's activities. The Gender and Disarmament programme is supported by the governments of the governments of Canada, Ireland, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

This report is a summary of the themes, insights and recommendations from a workshop held online, between 21 and 29 September 2021. The authors are grateful to all participants for sharing their knowledge and experience.

ABOUT UNIDIR

UNIDIR is a voluntarily funded, autonomous institute within the United Nations. One of the few policy institutes worldwide focusing on disarmament, UNIDIR generates knowledge and promotes dialogue and action on disarmament and security. Based in Geneva, UNIDIR assists the international community to develop the practical, innovative ideas needed to find solutions to critical security problems.

CITATION

Renata H. Dalaqua, Shimona Mohan & Hana Salama. 2021. "Gender Perspectives on Arms Control and Disarmament: Views from South and South East Asia", Workshop Report, UNIDIR, Geneva.

NOTE

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INTRODUCTION

How do weapons proliferation and misuse affect different groups of society in South and South East Asia? How do gender norms impact how weapons are seen and used in the region? How can we ensure that arms control and disarmament process address these gender perspectives and become more effective in responding to gender-based threats?

These were some of the main questions guiding a virtual workshop organized by UNIDIR in September 2021. The workshop brought together diplomats, military officers, policy-makers, activists, civil society practitioners and academics from 11 countries in South and South East Asia, as well as representatives of regional and international organizations.

Over four days, participants exchanged policy ideas, research findings and lived experiences of gender dynamics in contexts of armed violence and insecurity. They analysed recent initiatives and formulated proposals to improve understanding of gender perspectives and their relevance to peace and security. Here are some of the main takeaways and recommendations.

1. Taking stock of the impact of COVID19 pandemic on violence against women and online misogyny

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far reaching impacts across the globe. Many places saw a sharp rise in the levels of violence against women and girls, a fact that was echoed by workshop participants. In addition to physical acts of violence, participants noted the growing problem of online harassment and misogyny.

Data from India, Malaysia and Sri Lanka showed that both the volume of misogynistic Facebook posts and tweets, as well as individuals' engagement with them spiked during COVID-related lockdowns (March-June 2020), with a 168% increase in comparison with the same period in 2019.¹ There was also a rise in relative search volumes for misogynistic content, like “feminazi” and “misandry”, focus-shifting to “men’s rights”, and interest in “incel” groups in many Asian countries.² Participants corroborated these research findings, noting that ***COVID-19 and feminism were both seen with contempt in some online spaces, often being referred to as flawed Western concepts or conspiracies altogether.***

Participants acknowledged the broad spectrum of gender-based violence (GBV), which can occur online and offline. They noted that responses to this problem should be coordinated, to address all its complexities, but that is still lacking in the region. The problem of online GBV has been coupled with inefficient reporting and redressal mechanisms since misogyny is not a standalone category when it comes to reporting offensive content online. Government and law enforcement officials are not always well-equipped to tackle online GBV, legal responses have remained slow and largely ineffective, often resulting in

1 UN Women. Social Media Monitoring on COVID-19 and Misogyny in Asia and the Pacific. 2020. https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2020/10/ap-wps-brief-covid-19-and-online-misogyny-hate-speech_final.pdf?la=en&vs=2206

2 Ibid.

little to no punitive actions.³ Addressing these online violations would require an effective mix of criminal, civil, legal, administrative and social responses.⁴

At UNIDIR workshop, participants noted that civil society and non-governmental organisations have taken up an active role to try to tackle the situation using a variety of innovative techniques. One example highlighted was the work of Mythos Lab, which uses humour to counter harmful narratives and develops social media literacy programmes.⁵ This is an innovative approach, that could be scaled up and also complemented by broader initiatives involving States, civil society, as well as tech and social media companies to prevent online harassment and violence against women.

2. Arms control can be an important means to curb violence against women, but it is not enough

Small arms and light weapons (SALW) can be used by perpetrators to commit violence against women, a fact that has been recognized by States in the negotiations of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). Workshop participants highlighted the importance of Article 7.4 of the ATT, which mandates State parties exporting such weapons to consider the risk of the arms being used to commit or facilitate serious acts of gender-based violence or violence against women and children.⁶ Similarly, participants also raised the importance of the United Nations Programme of Action to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects (UN PoA SALW) in preventing the illicit trafficking of weapons which directly and indirectly harms women.

While all UN member states have adopted the UN PoA SALW,⁷ the ATT is not yet universal and Asia is the region with the lowest number of State Parties to the treaty.⁸ Aware of this challenge, **participants stressed the importance of civil society organisations that work at the national level to promote the adoption and ratification of the ATT by their respective countries.** They emphasized the need for more sustainable funding towards campaign activities related to the national implementation of these international instruments.

Although necessary, treaties covering SALW control are not sufficient to end gender-based violence, not least because there are other means to harm women and not all of them are classified as weapons. One of such examples mentioned by participants was the prevalence of acid attacks against women and girls in some countries. In view of this, participants argued that legal measures need to be accompanied by awareness raising campaigns that can bring positive change in attitudes and beliefs towards gender equality at local levels.

3 Heather Barr. "As Online Gender-Based Violence Booms, Governments Drag Their Feet." Human Rights Watch. 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/essay/online-gender-based-violence-booms-governments-drag-feet>.

4 United Nations General Assembly. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. 2021. <https://undocs.org/A/76/258>

5 Mythos Labs <https://mythoslabs.org/>

6 United Nations. Arms Trade Treaty. 2014. https://thearmstradetreaty.org/hyper-images/file/ATT_English/ATT_English.pdf?templateId=137253

7 United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament. The United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons. <https://unrcpd.org/conventional-weapons/poa/>

8 The Arms Trade Treaty. Treaty Status. <https://thearmstradetreaty.org/treaty-status.html?lang=fr>

3. Leveraging the normative power of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda at national level

An important framework for advancing women's participation in international security, as well as gendered considerations in policy development, is the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. During the discussions, several participants referred to the WPS agenda and the initial United Nations Security Council Resolution, UNSCR 1325 (2000), which effectively launched the agenda. It was noted that Bangladesh played a significant role in the passing of 1325 during its membership of the Security Council in 2000. Since then, Bangladesh and other countries in South and Southeast Asia have adopted National Action Plans (NAPs) to implement the WPS agenda at national level, including Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines and Timor-Leste.

Participants shared insights from their experiences in national consultations related to 1325 NAPs and the need to include weapons governance in those plans. It was noted that the Philippines, for instance, has included SALW control in their NAP.⁹ This development and, more broadly, ***the recognition of the linkages between weapons and violence against women has created space for women to engage even more in disarmament issues at the local and community levels***. In this process, a number of civil society groups has engaged with policy makers, raising awareness about the consequences of weapons proliferation and lobbying for ATT ratification and UN PoA implementation.

Another relevant case came from Nepal, where actors from different sectors of society took part in a consultative process aimed at reviewing the country's first NAP and discussing actions for the second Action Plan. Unlike the Philippines, the Nepalese NAP has not yet explicitly included actions related to weapons governance. However, civil society, politicians and international organizations are working to raise awareness about the importance of addressing arms control and disarmament as part of WPS implementation.

Including provisions to address weapons control in NAPs is a step that can be strengthened by other actions at national level, for instance, with the adoption of legislation denying gun licences to those either convicted of domestic violence, GBV, violent intimidation or stalking or are seen as being at a high risk of committing these crimes. As noted in UNIDIR report "Connecting the Dots", several studies spanning more than 10 countries indicate correlations between laws restricting the purchase of firearms (e.g. background check requirements) and lower rates of intimate partner homicides, and between laws restricting access to firearms (e.g. safer storage requirements) and lower rates of unintentional firearm deaths in children.¹⁰

9 Government of the Philippines. National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2017–2022. 2017. https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/Philippines_20172022NAP.pdf

10 J. Santaella-Tenorio, M. Cerdá, A. Villaveces and S. Galea. "What Do We Know About the Association Between Firearm Legislation and Firearm-Related Injuries?" *Epidemiologic Reviews*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 140–157. 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1093/epirev/mxv012>

4. Promoting women's participation in international and national security

A common theme that emerged throughout the discussions was the persistence of harmful gender stereotypes in the field of security, which has shaped discourse on security and limited women's engagement in this area of work. A participant noted that ***gender issues are often seen as distraction to so-called "hard security" issues, a term that itself can be seen as a gendered construct that restricts the space for women's contribution in these discussions.***

It is no surprise that most national security institutions in the region – such as the Ministries of Defence, foreign service, military, and police – are predominantly staffed by men. A study by UN Women about law enforcement in the ASEAN region found that women make up only between 6 to 20% of police officers in the region.¹¹ This is despite a recognition by police officers themselves that a diverse work force improves operational effectiveness. In particular, when it comes to responding to gender and sexual based violence and crime, building trust with communities and deescalating violent situations.¹²

In spite of these challenges, participants shared examples and best practices for promoting women's participation in South and South East countries. In Thailand, Norwegian People's Aid (NPAID) has implemented several measures to promote gender equality in mine action, including offering training opportunities for women as deminers. By applying a gender analysis to their work, as well striving for gender balance in demining teams and in the rest of their organisations, NPAID has acted as a "role model" and championed gender issues in their activities with national stakeholders.

In Singapore, the police force has been able to increase the number of women over the last 20 years by challenging gender stereotypes about policing through a public campaigning, which showcased women officers across a wide range of divisions. This has provided role models for women who were considering careers in the police force and existing police-women who may be wondering what career paths are available to them. The campaign also included informative messages about the nature of police work and the need for a diverse skill set coming from a diverse workforce.¹³

Another example mentioned during the discussions referred to women's active participation in the formulation of violence prevention strategies and actions. In the Philippines, women played important roles in conflict resolution, peace processes and in the development of policies related to the implementation of the WPS agenda. At the regional level, participants highlighted the "ASEAN Women for Peace Registry", which seeks to list and make visible women experts in peace and conflict prevention from the region. It is a diverse registry comprising women from different sectors who can provide expertise in gender issues and the implementation of the WPS agenda in the region.¹⁴

11 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Interpol and UN Women. Women in Law Enforcement in the ASEAN Region. 2020. https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/Publications/2020/women_in_law_enforcement_in_the_asean_region_full.pdf

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation. ASEAN Women for Peace Registry. <https://asean-aipr.org/asean-women-peace-registry/>

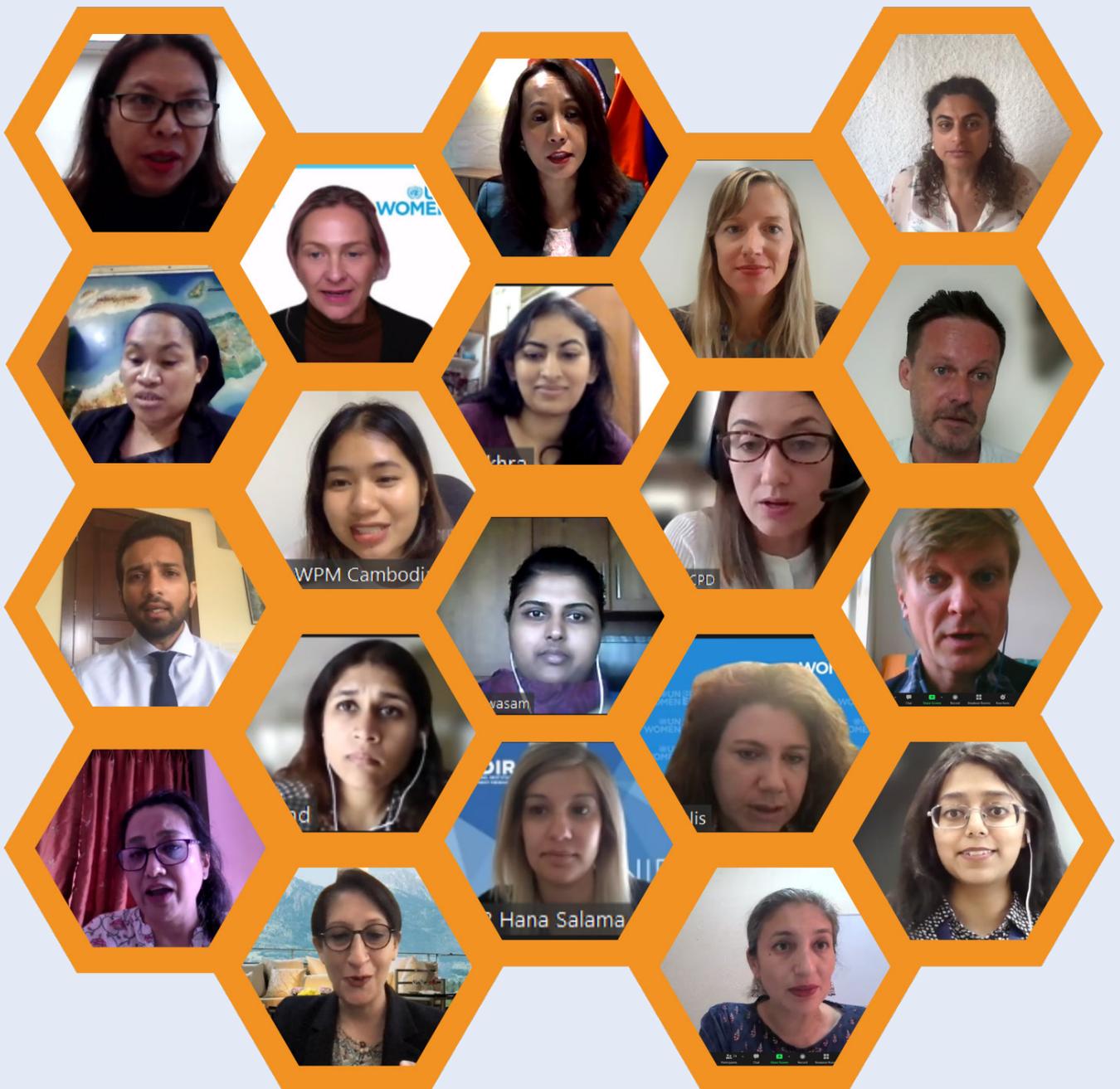
5. Gender equality is positive and possible

A strong message that emerged from the discussions was that achieving gender equality in the arms control and disarmament is not only possible, but it is also positive. Participants noted the benefits of having policies and practices in place to promote equality in mine action, for instance, where the engagement of diverse groups of society is needed to ensure better and more sustainable outcomes. In a similar vein, gender equality was also considered as an essential factor in a country's security and stability. Research by the World Bank, as well as other institutions, have showed that the more gender equal a state is, the more peaceful and stable too.¹⁵

Gender champions should emphasize these points in all their actions and do more to convey the message that gender-sensitive measures are also in the interest of men and boys. Similarly, to women and girls, men and boys are affected by gender stereotypes and expectations that can limit their potential, cause harm and even cut short their lives, in the battlefield and elsewhere. UNIDIR will continue to produce research and engage with policy actors on gender-responsive disarmament. Ultimately, a gender approach to conflict-related matters should be in the interest of all people, of all genders, as it can help States to enhance the security and well-being of everyone.

15 C. Crespo-Sancho. "Can gender equality prevent violent conflict?" World Bank Blogs. 2018. <https://blogs.world-bank.org/dev4peace/can-gender-equality-prevent-violent-conflict>

Thank you to the 52 participants who took part in the workshop representing 11 countries in the region – Cambodia; India; Indonesia; Laos; Malaysia; Nepal; Pakistan; Philippines; Sri Lanka; Thailand; Timor Leste – and 3 International or regional organizations – ASEAN Inter-parliamentary Assembly; UN Women; UNRCPD.



Sustainable peace is inextricably linked with gender equality.

How do weapons proliferation and misuse affect different groups of society in South and South East Asia? How do gender norms impact how weapons are seen and used in the region? How can we ensure that arms control and disarmament process address these gender perspectives and become more effective in responding to gender-based threats?

These were some of the main questions guiding the discussions at a regional workshop organized by UNIDIR with South and South East Asia participants. Drawing on the expertise and experience of diplomats, military officers, civil society practitioners, and academics, this report offers ideas to promote gender perspectives in arms control, as well as to improve women's participation in international security.

