

ASEAN-Australia special summit has much work to do on women's role in peace and security

Written by Susan Hutchinson, PhD Candidate, Australian National University

The first outcome of last month's ASEAN-Australia Special Summit was a planned [round table on Women, Peace and Security](#) to be held in Melbourne from April 17-19.

[ASEAN members](#) and Australia have a lot to talk about to improve their understanding and implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Discussions should include barriers to women's participation in regional peace and security institutions, countering violent extremism, foreign fighters, sexual violence in conflict, and the Rohingya crisis.

Read more: [*The ASEAN-Australia Special Summit marks a step toward a deeper relationship*](#)

Women's role in peace and security initiatives

The Women, Peace and Security agenda came into being in October 2000. The United Nations Security Council passed [a resolution](#) that requires member states to protect women from sexual violence in armed conflict and increase women's participation in conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution, relief and recovery. Since passing this resolution, the Security Council has passed seven more resolutions on the agenda.

In [one of those resolutions](#) , the Security Council urged member states to:

ensure the participation and leadership of women and women's organisations in developing strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism.

They also called for:

greater integration by Member States and the United Nations of their agendas on women, peace and security, counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism.

Counter-terrorism efforts continue to exclude women

Directly before the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit, experts from the region discussed the [need for coherent and comprehensive action to counter radicalisation and violent extremism](#). But counter-terrorism policies and practices in the region and their ongoing development continue to exclude women.

There are also a range of barriers to women's participation in peace and security institutions. One example is [compulsory virginity testing for prospective policewomen in Indonesia](#).

A worryingly [high number of foreign fighters](#) travelled from ASEAN countries to Syria and Iraq to fight with Da'esh and other extremist groups. Indonesians represent [the second highest](#) nationality of foreign fighters arrested in Turkey. In part, this may be because of the number of women, children, and whole families who have travelled to Syria and Iraq. But the statistic is still alarming.

[Some estimates](#) have over 100 foreign fighters from both Malaysia and the Philippines. But [other estimates](#) place the overall number of foreign fighters from South East Asia at over 1000. This includes a unit of 700 people largely from Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, but also a few from Singapore.

Deradicalisation and reintegration of returned fighters requires a comprehensive social policy approach, specifically involving women, who are vital contributors to the community and social networks.

Greater commitment to prosecuting international crimes is needed

Many of those foreign fighters may have committed the international crimes described in [another of the Security Council resolutions](#), calling for an end to impunity for sexual violence in armed conflict.

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When sexual violence is perpetrated as part of an armed conflict, it is a war crime. When that violence is widespread or systematic, it's a crime against humanity. When it's used to destroy in whole or in part, an ethnic, racial or religious group, it is genocide.

[Da’esh has perpetrated all three of these crimes](#) . Individual perpetrators need to be held accountable. Only two of the ten ASEAN members are signatory to the statute that requires national courts to prosecute such crimes.

Australia is also a signatory. Australia [has called for](#) investigations and prosecutions of these crimes.

Both the foreign minister and attorney-general have stated Australia will investigate and prosecute alleged perpetrators. The logistics and funding of this are yet to be resolved. But Indonesia has asked for a [regional approach to the issue of foreign fighters](#) , so there may be benefit to discussing regional approaches to investigation and prosecution.

Read more: [Why we need to end impunity for sexual violence in armed conflict](#)

The elephant in the room

In any ASEAN Women, Peace and Security discussion, the elephant in the room is the Rohingya crisis. The evidence that [Burmese forces have used sexual violence](#) as a weapon of war and a tool of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya is overwhelming.

[Human Rights Watch](#)

has reported the actions of the military, border police and militias amount to crimes against humanity under international law.

At the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit, Malaysia was alone in its [condemnation of the atrocities Myanmar is perpetrating against the Rohingya](#)

. While ASEAN discussions are characterised by extreme delicacy, these crimes need to be

accounted for in ongoing regional engagement with the Burmese military and in regional contributions to humanitarian needs.

A national action plan for Australia

Australia is in the process of updating its [National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security](#) . There have been some key developments since the release of the last plan.

The international community has agreed on a new [framework for sustainable development](#) .

This includes goals on

[gender equality](#)

, and

[peace and justice](#)

. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has made a

[binding recommendation](#)

on how that

[convention](#)

applies for women in conflict prevention, conflict, and post conflict situations.

[Indonesia and The Philippines](#) are the only two ASEAN members with national action plans.

When Pacific countries were initially coming to terms with their obligations, the Pacific Islands Forum developed a regional action plan. Perhaps ASEAN could do the same. As promised in the [Sydney Declaration](#) , such a plan would certainly show a commitment “to the principles of the women, peace and security agenda and to strengthen collaboration on promoting the role of women in building and sustaining peace.”

Susan Hutchinson has undertaken consulting work with the Australian Government on the implementation of women, peace and security agenda. Susan is the architect of the 'prosecute; don't perpetrate' campaign calling on governments to investigate and prosecute their own nationals for sexual violence perpetrated as war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide while fighting with Da'esh in Syria and Iraq. She is also a member of the Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security.

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